

**The Sublime as Model:
Formal Complexity in Joyce, Eisenstein and Stockhausen**

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Abstract:

“The Sublime as Model: Formal Complexity in Joyce, Eisenstein and Stockhausen,” undertakes an investigation of three paradigmatic late-modernist works in three mediums — James Joyce’s novel, *Finnegans Wake*, Sergei Eisenstein’s film, *Ivan the Terrible I & II*, and Karlheinz Stockhausen’s orchestral work, *Gruppen for Three Orchestras* — with an aim to demonstrating cross-media similarities, and establishing a model for examining their most salient trait: formal complexity. This model is based on a reading of the Kantian “mathematical sublime” as found in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as well as borrowing vocabulary from phenomenology, particularly that of Edmund Husserl. After establishing a critical vocabulary based around an analysis of the mathematical sublime and a survey of the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, the dissertation investigates each of the three works and many of their attendant critical works with an aim to illuminate the ways in which their formal complexity can be described, how this type of complexity is particular to late-modernism in general, and these works in particular, and what conclusions can be drawn about the structure and meaning of the works and the critical analyses they accrue. Much of this analysis fits into the rubric of the meta-critical, and there is a strong focus on critical surveys, as the dissertation attempts to provide cross-media models for critical vocabulary, and drawing many examples from extant criticism. The dissertation concludes with reflections on the concept of “models” for criticism, their construction and their value.

Dedication:

Thanks to my parents, to R. Bruce Elder and the rest of my committee, including those present for its early stages, to Amanda Lucier, and finally, this paper is dedicated to my friends from the program, Boris Pantev and Angela Joosse:

Seuls des amis peuvent tendre un plan d'immanence comme un sol qui se dérobe aux idoles.

– Gilles Deleuze

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The Sublime as Model:

Formal Complexity in Joyce, Eisenstein and Stockhausen

The object's resistance is the leading clue;
the object's demands are the foremost consideration.

- Yve-Alain Bois

1. Introduction

Speaking of the complexity, impenetrability and the general “difficultness” of modernist art, and in particular late-modernist art, is commonplace enough to be almost cliché. While late-modernist painting is often seen as inscrutable or obscure, the two-dimensionality of its surfaces usually precludes any accusations of willful *complexity* per se. Late-modernist literature, on the other hand, bears the brunt of the “needlessly complex” accusations, Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* and Joyce’s transition from *Ulysses* to *Finnegans Wake* being paradigmatic of the perceived movement from “merely” complex to “needlessly” so. Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound and many of the early American novelists whose work hovers on the border between late-modernity and post-modernity (say, William Gaddis, John Barth) embody greater or lesser versions of this perceived sin, but few reach the heights of impenetrability achieved by Stein and Joyce. In the worlds of classical music and its much younger sibling, film, two types of complexity were emergent in the transitional period between late modernism and post-modernism: the experimental and the avant-garde. For music, this divide was almost perfectly geographical, with the mostly-European heirs to Schoenberg and serialism crafting increasingly complex avant-garde pieces that maintained focus on tonality, harmony and rhythm, while the mostly-American experimental artists exploring the new worlds of emergence and stochastic

composition, experimenting with silence (John Cage) and repetition (Terry Riley) in a decidedly non-traditional manner. While a few outliers could be said to straddle the two worlds (notable Iannis Xenakis), most compositions fell on either side of the line, and in terms of the type of limit-testing complexity that characterized a work like *Finnegans Wake*, the European avant-garde were at the forefront of late-modernist complex works, perhaps best exemplified by the young Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Gruppen*. The situation in film had an equivalent divide, although much more chronologically and slightly less geographically sundered. For film the avant-garde version of complexity reached its heights in the French and Soviet maximalist traditions embodied by Abel Gance and Sergei Eisenstein respectively. The masterpieces exemplary of this period and these artists – *Napoléon* (1927) and *Ivan the Terrible I & II* (1944, 1945) – exhibit a complexity characterized by the sheer amount of information presented on screen at any given time. Whether conveyed by lighting, camerawork, background symbolism, or acting style, both films express the late-modernist sense of overwhelming detail in the *particular* paired with huge breadth of theme in the *universal*. We can oppose this type of filmic complexity to the type of “difficult” films that emerged from the American experimental film movement, especially the films of Hollis Frampton and Stan Brakhage. While the films of Gance and Eisenstein are undeniably avant-garde, the films of Hollis and Brakhage are more analogous to the experimental music of the period in that their version of complexity is less concerned with pure maximal expression and representation possible, and more with qualities of emergence, reception and process.

All of these divisions, however, between modernist and late-modernist, experimental and avant-garde and even between the complex and the simple, are at their best no more than useful if blurry lines. There are many different models or heuristics which could order the works of the

period in a multitude of different configurations, and any consideration of a set of these works taken as a series will necessarily be as much about the heuristic as the works themselves. It is in this spirit that this dissertation will undertake to investigate a very particular set of late modernist works, under a very particular model of critical relatedness. The critical concept around which this paper is organized is that of the “Modernist Sublime”, a concept based on the Kantian mathematical sublime and meant to encompass a very particular sort of artistic complexity embodied by three works in particular: James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible I & II*, and Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Gruppen*. These works were chosen under the hypothesis that they exhibit specific aesthetic characteristics endemic to late modernism and are worth examining as such. Briefly, they are all marked by a drive towards the limits of expression within their respective media, both on a microcosmic and macrocosmic level. By "microcosmic," I mean the concern with the smallest comprehensible units of meaning expressible in their respective media, and by "macrocosmic" I mean the deployment of these units of meaning within the largest possible comprehensible superstructure. The differential between these two fronts not only creates a high level of complexity, but a complexity of a type that sustains structural similarities across media. The Kantian mathematical sublime, as a philosophical concept, is not directly related to any type of artistic creation, much less modernist art specifically, but its description of the reception of complexity and the intimations of the infinite in general will prove useful for describing features of these works. The selection of this particular set of works, of course, is as dependent on the use of the Kantian concept as vice-versa. While other works could easily be considered using this heuristic (in fact, Deleuze notably uses it to examine Gance¹), the three works I have selected work especially well in concert, and will hopefully serve to

¹ Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 48)

illuminate the Kantian concept as much as they do each other.

While my use of the sublime will be explained in a separate chapter, it will be useful here, before an introduction of the works themselves, to outline in brief some of the philosophical concepts and terms of art to be used in the course of this paper, specifically the central concept of the Kantian mathematical sublime and the phenomenological apparatus and vocabulary that my particular use of it will necessitate. After introducing the basic conceptual apparatus of Kantian and phenomenological terminology, I will proceed to introduce the works themselves, followed by an exploration of their historical and conceptual context through the lenses of three paradigmatic thinkers: Jürgen Habermas, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou. As such, this introduction will serve as a microcosm of the paper in its entirety. The introduction will be followed by chapters on Kant, phenomenology, *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible I & II*, and *Gruppen*, followed by a brief concluding chapter drawing parallels between the works and exploring some of the issues surrounding the use of conceptual models such as the Kantian sublime outside of their original domain.

Conceptual Apparatus

Kant and the Sublime

A claim of this paper is that the Kantian concept of the mathematical sublime is a useful heuristic for understanding the formal complexity of the *Wake*, *Ivan*, and *Gruppen*, not only in terms of an isolated characteristic, but also in terms of how this characteristic is reflective of concerns endemic to late modernism. This view of formal complexity is derived from an examination of the works' structure, as well as consideration of the creation of these works and their reception by critical and lay audiences. As this analysis is not undertaken from a purely Kantian

perspective, a framework is needed for the link between the Kantian sublime and other formal, historical, or phenomenological vocabulary and concepts. The following section will briefly explain some of this vocabulary but for now I will merely attempt to explain the mathematical sublime and give some idea of how I intend to deploy it.

The Kantian sublime is divided into two notions: the dynamically sublime and the mathematically sublime, both comprising an experience of the feeling of the ascension or superiority of the supersensible over the sensible. The dynamically sublime is primarily related to the concept of our relation to the *power* of nature, and the mathematical to that of the *measure* of nature. Because the sublime is evoked by a sense of the superiority of the supersensible over the sensible, it is an essentially relational concept based on a *differential*. Simplified, the dynamically sublime involves the experience of our faculty of reason's superiority to the power of nature despite our sensible awe or fear in the face of its power. The dynamically sublime is evoked through the differential between these two feelings: sensible awe at nature's power to terrify, and the supersensible understanding of our superiority to this power. The mathematical sublime involves an encounter with something whose measure exceeds the imagination's ability to apprehend it, but is capable of being grasped in reason. This feeling then, involves the differential between the feeling of awe at the overwhelming of our apprehensive ability in the face of the infinite and the feeling of superiority of our supersensible faculty of reason to grasp the infinite as a concept.

As I will not be focusing on the dynamically sublime, I will leave my explanation as it lies for now, and instead flesh out the concept of the mathematical sublime and its possibilities as an artistic concept. My use of this concept is predicated on several of its facets. The first of these is that the process through which the mathematical sublime is evoked involves the differentiation

between our grasp of the infinite through reason and through imagination. Put simply, reason is capable of grasping the infinite as a concept even as imagination is *incapable* of holding it; the difference between these attempts to grasp the infinite, and our reason's superiority over the imagination, produces the feeling of the sublime. Intrinsic to this basic differentiation are the concepts of apprehension (*Auffassung*) and comprehension (*Zusammenfassung*). In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, apprehension is defined as a theoretically limitless synthesizing of intuition, reproduction, and recognition of the manifold of empirical experience; comprehension is a similar process, but depends on understanding and is therefore reflective. These are the two acts by which we receive data, and, in the case of datum of magnitude, take it up and attach to it "quanta" or units of measurement by which we might compare sizes or perform mathematical judgments. The differential between the infinite as perceived in apprehension and that perceived in comprehension (and the fact that our supersensible faculties *can* grasp, for example, the infinitude our sensibility cannot) produces our sense of the sublime. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where the analytic of the sublime occurs, the concept of apprehension is slightly varied, as it deals with aesthetic apprehension specifically (aesthetic in the Kantian sense of αἴσθησις, not in terms of the art-critical). For now, however, we can use these terms to understand how the difference between the comprehension and apprehension of a complex work could evoke the sublime, especially if the unit of measurement with which the vastness of the work is measured is an incredibly small one.

The concept of comprehension and apprehension of magnitude in the context of the sublime shows how the macrocosmic and microcosmic limits explored by each of these works can be seen as dealing with the artistic expression of the infinite and the infinitesimal. Given that the works are not, of course, "infinite" in any literal or mathematical sense, their relationship to

the infinite—and the idea that they might have a closer connection to the infinite than other, equally finite but less structurally-complex works—is reliant on a certain indexical relationship between a finite work and the concept of infinite. This particular type of indexical relationship between the finite and the infinite is dependent on the idea that certain types of finite but complex forms, such as self-referential or repetitive forms, can allow a subject to comprehend the concept of the infinite. The relationship between human subjects and the infinite, from Kant and Hegel to contemporary commentators such as Alain Badiou, often revolves around how we comprehend the *finite*, and how the infinite might manifest within the finite. This relationship is often one of indexicality, whereby one formal element of a finite object refers to the more generalized concept of the infinite, often in a way that makes it possible to grasp the concept, at least in terms of comprehension.

A possible resource for examining this sort of indexical relationship between the finite and the infinite can be found in Hegel's *The Science of Logic*, which I will explore through the lens of Badiou's reading further on. For now it should suffice to summarize the essence of the Hegelian thesis on infinity as, in the words of Badiou:

the point of being, since it is always intrinsically discernible, *generates* out of itself the operator of infinity; that is, the surpassing, which combines, as does any operator of this genre, the step-further (the still-more) – here, the frontier – and the automatism of repetition – here, the having to be. (*Being and Event*, 163)

A schema wherein the infinite may be generated out of the finite is clearly necessary for my general thesis, given that none of these works are truly 'infinite' in any way (Umberto Eco's 'infinite semiosis' notwithstanding), and the Hegelian conception's integration of the concepts of surpassing and the frontier make it especially suited to my purposes, as is the well know differentiation between the 'one thing after another' of the Hegelian 'bad infinity' to the immanent 'overcoming' or 'surpassing' of the 'good infinite'. For now, we can consider an

‘indexical’ relationship to the infinite to be predicated on the finite’s potential to surpass its own frontiers, the first of what will be many appearances of the thought form of ‘a ground which both delimits and provides the potential for surpassing’.

My conception of *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan* and *Gruppen* as particular examples of finite works with indexical relationships to the infinite is based on their particular complexity and immanent sense of surpassing. An indexical relationship with the concept of the infinite is evident in other works, notably in the use of repetition and recursion in postmodern art; however, the evocation of the infinite in the works at hand is remarkable in its reliance on this difference between microcosm and macrocosm. The Kantian mathematical sublime, the evocation of which is partially dependent on one’s apprehension and comprehension of differences in magnitude, thus provides a framework wherein we might understand the possibility of finite objects or concepts to point towards infinite ones, as well as a formal framework on which to hang the ideas of micro- and macro-limits within an artistic work.

Another crucial aspect of the Kantian sublime is its emphasis on the *subjective* nature of sublimity; in other words, the idea something cannot be, in itself, sublime, but may only *be capable of evoking* sublimity in subjects. Along with this distinction it is also important to point out that Kant himself severely de-emphasizes the possibility of speaking of artworks in terms of the sublime and prefers a focus on natural phenomena, a differentiation from this paper which will be addressed in the chapter proper. One way of justifying this apparent misreading would be to appeal to the longevity of the concept of the sublime and the diversity of the post-Kantian readings which it has inspired, which speak both to its centrality within the *Critiques* as well as to its *flexibility* outside of the bounds of strict or even neo-Kantianism. One of Kant’s greatest mathematically-minded interpreters, J. Fang, wrote in *Philosophia Mathematica* that “the

Critique is neither externally so fragile that one can willynilly take it apart, nor internally so rigid that it cannot subsume the progressive elements of modern development" ("Kant and Modern Mathematics" 54).

That being said, Kant's emphasis on the *subjective* nature of the sublime is important for this work in that it stands as a useful tool for understanding artworks in terms of their qualities of testing the limits of expression and comprehensibility *for subjects*. This allows for a very important question: "For whom is this work sublime?" This distinction is of special import in the works at hand, as one of the dubious distinctions to which each can lay claim is a general, and even critical, reception far removed from any notion of sublimity. *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible*, and *Gruppen* are all, rather, known for obliqueness and extreme opacity, bringing the question of for whom these works could possibly evoke sublimity into sharper focus than usual. As one can only ever tell if the sublime has "worked" (evoked the infinite, for example) through subjective testimony, this paper has an unusually heavy reliance on critical sources, as the major critics and readers of the respective works are the best sources for beginning to answer the question of "for whom is this work sublime?". The natural extension of this important question of "for whom?" is that of "how?" Both questions revolve around notions of *localization* of subjectivity, often occurring in forms such as: "What historical situatedness produces subjects for whom these works evoke the sublime?" or, in terms of instantiation, "What set of conditions are necessary for the production of the *moment* in which these works evoke the sublime?" These questions are best pursued, I believe, with the aid of a phenomenological vocabulary and framework, which will be the second apparatus outlined below.

Phenomenology and Worldhood

Rephrasing my central thesis will help locate the exact place phenomenological vocabulary will have in my work: Three exemplary, or paradigmatic late-modernist artworks, *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible* and *Gruppen* share similar engagements with concepts of formal complexity on two fronts—a minimal front involving the smallest comprehensible units of expression, and a maximal front involving the size and interrelatedness of the super-structures in which these units are deployed. Furthermore, I argue that this engagement with complexity is essentially a way of engaging with the concept of the infinite, and that all three of these works allow their audiences to relate to the infinity they evoke, an evocation I believe is best understood in the context of Kant’s mathematical sublime.

Phenomenological vocabulary is needed at two points here: it is needed at the point where I write “allow their audiences to relate to the infinity they evoke” and it is needed at the point where I write “in the *context* of Kant’s mathematical sublime”. If my thesis was simply that these works have similar formal structures, phenomenological vocabulary would be unnecessary. If my thesis was that these works, because of their similar formal structures, evoked the Kantian mathematical sublime, I would need phenomenology, but Kant’s would suffice. What demands the intervention of a more nuanced vocabulary is the fact that my thesis first of all involves the *reception* of the works, and second, is not Kantian. I am deploying a Kantian concept within an explicitly non-Kantian art-critical framework, and although I endeavor to defend my use of Kant’s concept in my chapter on the sublime, I am still in need of a variety of non-Kantian vocabulary with which to interface this concept to the formal art-critical analysis comprising the rest of my work. A phenomenological vocabulary is appropriate because of its ability to speak to the notions of apprehension and comprehension central to Kant’s argument, as well as its relation to, and often foundational role in, the formation of models of reception in art in general. Much

like the Kantian element, however, my use of phenomenology is restricted mostly to the deployment of its vocabulary, as I do not undertake any true phenomenological description of the works at hand. That being said, my inclusion of a small chapter on phenomenology is important in that it should serve as a background against which the rest my investigations are set. As will be illustrated in my discussions of Habermas, Agamben and Badiou below, one need not rely entirely on phenomenological description to employ a phenomenological attitude or outlook in one's critical work and it is in this spirit that much of this paper is undertaken.

In keeping with the importance of *reception* for my thesis, as well as my focus on the provenance of these works, phenomenology is useful for providing a host of concepts and terms surrounding the question of situatedness: the place from which one makes an aesthetic judgment or receives a work. The vocabulary surrounding the question of situatedness varies from thinker to thinker, but generally involves the idea of a "world" as well as some variation of the concept of facticity (such as the hermeneutic circle). As far as "worlds" are concerned, whether descendent from the Husserlian concept of the Horizon, or, later, the *Lebenswelt* (a term which came to its fullest figuration in *The Crisis*); the Heideggerian concept of *Weltlichkeit*; or Badiou's definition in his *Logics of Worlds* whereby a world is a "machine for localizing being", the concept is integral for any investigation of the "whence and wherefore" of aesthetic reception. Although we will deal with these concepts in more detail further on, for now it should serve to give a brief example of what is meant by "world" in the context of the Husserlian "Horizon", and how it can lead to a concept of facticity. Don Ihde provides an excellent description of "horizon" and "world" qua visual experience in his *Listening and Voice*:

I [...] note that ordinarily I am concerned with, focus my attention on, things or "objects," the words on the page. But I now note that these are always situated within what begins to appear to me as a widening field that ordinarily is a background from which the "object" or thing stands out. I now find by a

purposeful act of attention that I may turn to the field as field, and in the case of vision I soon also discern that the field has a kind of boundary or limit, a horizon. This horizon always tends to “escape” me as I try to get at it; it “withdraws” always on the extreme fringe of the visual field. It retains a certain essentially enigmatic character. But within the field, as I return to the ordinary attending and my involvements with things, I discover that not only is the “world” of vision referred to me within experience overall, but that all the “objects” within that field of visual experience are never unsituated even within the field. Things or “objects” appear only as essentially situated in a field. (38)

As Ihde points out, this is basically a naïve description containing many “latent” phenomenological results, and as such serves as an excellent introduction to the vocabulary surrounding the concepts of horizon and world. The key element for our purposes is the idea of a horizon as the limit against which the world is framed, and in which our consciousness experiences the world. Obviously this limit need not be visual, but can be thought of in terms of the metaphor of a literal visual horizon in terms of its ambiguity (the way it “withdraws”) but essential capacity to frame what occurs within it. We can go on to speak about horizons as world-constituting in terms of both subjective-experiential horizons, as well as cultural or linguistic horizons, all of which maintain the same basic structure. This concept is especially important in light of the type of aesthetic phenomena constituting the Kantian sublime, which, again, has far more to do with αἰσθησις than it does with aesthetics in the sense in which it is often used today, i.e. art criticism. The importance of a concept of worldhood to the use of the concept of the sublime lies in the sublime’s place at the junction of comprehension and apprehension, imagination and reason, and the sensible and super-sensible. Worldhood’s importance for Kant’s aesthetic, and the somewhat non-Kantian question of its applicability to works of art, demands a framework in which the subject-to-sublimity can be understood as emerging from a particular set of conditions which both delimit the subject’s interpretation and provide the grounds for its possibility. This is, in other words, a question of the horizons of a subject, of the way in which

they perceive the world, and how that perceiving constitutes that world in perception. This model will appear in various forms in the course of this paper, and will be explained in more depth in the short chapter on phenomenology. For now we will turn to the works of art themselves.

The Works

Finnegans Wake

Finnegans Wake, James Joyce's final work, the "night book" to accompany the "day book" of *Ulysses*, relates the story of a xenolalic Dublin family, each member of which, although possessed of definite characteristics, shifts through several protean identities both historical and literary in the course of a sprawling and recursive family tragedy mapped anisomorphically onto global themes. It is written in a dense, and densely allusive, idiom composed mainly of multilingual portmanteau words, often containing three or more lexical references per morphemic unit. Criticism of this work is varied in both perspective and conclusions, but two constant themes are its density in terms of the smallest units of meaning, and its breadth in terms of the deployment of that meaning in the service of universalist themes. The work's renowned difficulty stems from the near impossibility of engaging the work on both axes of complexity simultaneously, as evidenced by the distance between critical models that take a holistic versus an atomistic approach to the text. It is a remarkable work not only for its formal achievements, but for its particular embodiment of the dialectic between the aneconomic and economic characteristics of language itself. This embodiment is especially remarkable for its unwillingness to *resolve* the dialectic, attributable to a relentless meta-level self-interrogation, and a materialist/atheistic core, a trait extant in Joyce from the early stories through the explicitly anti-transcendent *Ulysses* and coming to fullest fruition in the *Wake*.

Ivan The Terrible

Ivan the Terrible I & II (1944), Sergei Eisenstein's final work, originally planned as a trilogy but interrupted due both to its creator's heart attack and to its content falling out of favor with the state, is an eponymous historical portrait, superficially conformist to Stalinist historical ideals, yet filled with dense formal innovations and political and artistic contradictions. Nearly every frame of each film can be analyzed along several discrete lines of signification—from the Wagnerian, Meyerhold-influenced melodramatic acting style, to the rich store of Orthodox-influenced art meticulously painted in the backgrounds of nearly every scene, to the camera movements and cuts which serve to contradict or highlight many of the constituent elements of the shot. This work, too, utilizes miniscule details, such as the construction of the pro-filmic space, the formal structure of the editing style, and the musical and visual content in the service of a grand and almost overwhelmingly complex superstructure of meaning.

Gruppen

Gruppen (1957) is a musical composition for three orchestras written by Karlheinz Stockhausen as a climax of several musical ideas he had developed from the legacy of serialism and his own preoccupations with ways of musically representing different temporal shifts (and the ability of an audience to perceive these shifts). It is conducted by three conductors and, while remaining one cohesive piece, is composed of many rhythmically diverse groups of sound, often involving different tempi being performed by each orchestra. Only the spatial separation allows these differences to be distinguishable to an audience. It is often considered one of the most formidably complex of serialist or post-serialist works, notably for its use of minute tempo and

pitch changes in different spatial areas in order to create global shifts in the aggregate sound.

Like the *Wake* and *Ivan*, it can be characterized as enormously complex both in terms of minute temporal and tonal details and in the broader, global adumbrations of its melodic and harmonic superstructure.

Critical Context

There are numerous other points of intersection between these three works which will become apparent, but one parallel is worth remarking upon here. As a result of the enormous complexity of each of these works from the perspective of their creation as well as their reception, they have the shared distinction of accruing, in the critical literature, a great deal of commentary on the associated genetic or epiphenomenal material made available to posterity by their creators. In the case of Joyce's *Wake*, this includes many critical summaries and investigations of the over 6,000 pages of notes he used in the compiling of his work in progress. For *Ivan the Terrible*, it includes both the notes used in the creation and planning of the films and their aborted sequel as well as the numerous relevant material extant in Eisenstein's own writings, teaching material, and letters. For *Gruppen*, this commentary includes the attention paid not only Stockhausen's many interviews and essays regarding his own material, but also the notes for the development of the piece. Again, the *existence* of this material can be ascribed to the incredibly difficult processes of creating the works at hand, just as the critical reliance on this material can be attributed to the difficulty of exegesis. These factors contribute to a strong differentiation of general public reception from critical appraisal, as well as to a stronger presence of the author in the critical body as is usual. As such, differentiation between terms of engagement between creator/spectator/critic will often be a factor influencing the work's reception.

This differentiation between creator, spectator, and critic manifests in a slightly different mode when it comes to the evocation of the mathematical sublime. A full chapter will be devoted to the elucidation of this concept and its use here, but for the purposes of this introduction it will serve to explain this concept as a sensation arising from the differential between apprehension and comprehension of the infinite. While the necessity of its use as a concept is predicated on some as yet unexplored facets of these works and of aesthetic modernity, it is useful to keep it in mind as we move forwards. Also, when meditating on the differences between the creation of aesthetic objects and their reception by either a critic or layperson, it will be helpful to keep in mind the bearing that these positions have on the concept of αἴσθησις or perception in general, as well as on Kantian aesthetics and the notion of sublimity in particular. The question of for whom these works appear sublime, and what conditions were necessary for this evocation of sublimity, complicated by the critical/lay person's different reactions to the work, will be an important aspect of my reading of each work, necessitating the use of a phenomenological vocabulary which will be briefly developed in its own chapter.

As is befitting a project about expressive limits, the artistic/literary side of this paper's genesis was in an investigation of *Finnegans Wake* and its status as an artwork *sui generis* within late modernism or the history of art in general, and progressed from there to include the abovementioned works. However, Joyce's text, Eisenstein's film, and Stockhausen's piece were all chosen *as a consequence* of investigations into aesthetic movements and concepts produced by modernity and not vice-versa, and as such we will progress from the aesthetic and cultural concepts grounding the investigation towards the works themselves. The three works were, of course, chosen because of common *formal* characteristics, but these features are undoubtedly a product of their shared era, that of late modernity. While late modernity as such is not the topic at

hand, it will be necessary to delve, at least briefly, into the concept of limits in modernist aesthetics qua modernity. Phrased as succinctly as possible, the concern at the heart of aesthetic modernity most relevant here is the tension between the twinned concepts of "the end of art" and the edict "make it new." Although neither of these concepts can claim to be *birthed* in modernity, modernity can certainly claim their fullest figuration. Both are products of and catalysts for the altered time-consciousness co-emergent with the philosophies of Bergson and scientific discoveries of Eisenstein and Minkowsky, and are built around the idea of limits in the historic and subjective sense, calling, as they do, for perpetual genesis or perpetual stasis. Both concepts also spring from a particular sense of the absolute and the infinite, and have clear philosophical lines antedating their modernist figuration. All three of the works in question embody each of these opposing principles in fairly self-evident ways, standing as examples of both the outer limits of creative possibility in their respective media, and as barriers against which it seems impossible to push ("What can one do after *Finnegans Wake*?").

In order to put these relevant terms and concepts into their proper theoretical and historic context, I will take a short tour through the writings of three theorists whose work has informed my perspective on this subject: Jürgen Habermas, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou. Each of these thinkers has dealt with the question of modernity, aesthetic or otherwise, in great depth in the course of their careers, although the space given them here will not reflect that. Rather, by relating their ideas and perspectives on some key terms and concepts related to my field of inquiry, I will attempt to give an accurate and usable impression of what is at stake in a series of important concepts: the quest for limits; subjective apprehension and comprehension of aesthetic phenomena; the role of the critic, spectator, and reader; and the role of the infinite within the context of modernity and modernism.

Habermas

In the now classic collection *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Habermas is given the honour of being the first essay after the introduction because, as Foster explains, he is the only critic who does not hold with the assessment that “the project of modernity is now deeply problematic” (“Introduction”, ix). Rather, for Habermas, modernity’s core concepts are still worth defending against the incursion of postmoderns, anti-moderns and premoderns, the labels he bestows on artists and philosophers alike who stray from his particular modernist position. While his particular battles with these positions are not strictly relevant to this paper it is important to note that the belief in modernity is, as in the title of his essay ‘an incomplete project’ is not predicated on a belief that it is alive and well. In his introduction to the collection, Hal Foster explains how from most perspectives modernism as a tradition is, even according to Habermas ‘dominant but dead’. Foster concludes that the imperative of ‘vital art’ in the present (it is worth noting that the ‘present’ in this case is 1980) is to “exceed the modern” (ix). His analysis of the difficulties of accomplishing this imperative goes a long way towards establishing some of the grounding principles of modernism, particularly of the aesthetic variety:

How can we break with a program that makes a value of crisis (modernism), or progress beyond the era of Progress (modernity), or transgress the ideology of the transgressive (avant-gardism)? One can say, with Paul de Man, that every period suffers a “modern” moment, a moment of crisis or reckoning in which it becomes self-conscious *as* a period, but this is to view the modern ahistorically, almost as a category. True, the word may have “lost a fixed historical reference” (Habermas), but the ideology has not: modernism is a cultural construct based on specific conditions; it *has* a historical limit. (x)

This historical limit is, of course, different for different cultures, and contexts, and, aesthetically, for different media, but is still, according to almost all observers, generally definable, and we can, therefore, speak of modernism as not merely an aggregate of attitudes and works, but as a

period of history in which these works were produced. We can, to an extent, say that modernism is over without fully precluding Habermas' position regarding its completeness. His contribution to the collection is entitled 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', and is predicated on a belief that modernity, seen as an extension of enlightenment-era ideals of immanent refinement of the spheres of science, morality and art, each leveraged towards an autonomous and authentic cultural whole, is not only a project worth sustaining, but one for which the apparent failure of modernism as such (aesthetic modernity) is merely the 'negation of but one sphere'. Although for Habermas "modernity" is far removed from modernism in the sense of the artistic movement under examination here, having more to do with modernity in the philosophical sense, his conception of aesthetics in relation to modernity still has much to bring to bear on the ideals of modernism proper.

Habermas' take on aesthetic modernity, then, must be understood as being at odds with his ideal version of the 'complete' project of modernism, but still intimately tied to the type of limit-concepts Foster defined as key to the problem of 'surpassing' modernity. Before moving on to Habermas' essay, it is important to note that already in the excerpts from Foster's intro we can sense the contours of the problem of the end of art and its perpetual beginning, both in the historical sense of modernity and modernism defining themselves through concepts of limits difficult to surpass without redefining the terms of engagement, and in the ahistorical, aesthetic sense of the diversity and monumental stature ('dominant but dead') of the aesthetic works themselves. Like many definitions of modernism and modernity, Foster's account of the difficulty of surpassing it revolves around two seemingly contradictory movements. First, the modern as reflective and generative of crisis, that is, the idea of perpetual newness, both in the search for new forms with which to portray the changing world, and in terms of techno-scientific

advances shaping the world and its inhabitants in ways which necessarily result in fragmentation of self-image. This definition, although dependent on the existence of an underlying ethos or ideology ordering these responses into a definable whole, still creates a sense of perpetual creation and novelty. Second, there is the reverence with which the *period* is defined, and the very problematic of *surpassing*. This movement consigns modernity to history and, in the case of modern aesthetic objects, to the museum. Thus the 'end of art' and the problem of the great mute objects that the art of the period produced. Habermas' short article touches upon these and other questions of the period as well, and provides us with a series of new concepts revolving around aesthetic modernity and the question of limits.

In terms of the second question of limits, the one involving the absolute and the end of art, Habermas succinctly describes the shift that puts this concept into play: speaking of instances of the term 'modern' antedating modernity proper as primarily coinciding with resurgences of classicism, he writes that instead,

the emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from the authority of a post epoch; instead, a modern work becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern. Our sense of modernity creates its own self-enclosed canons of being classic. (3)

This is one of the concepts central to understanding the work of art in modernity in terms of the quest for limits and the 'end of art': the era is defined by its self-definition. Modern aesthetics attempts to escape the concept of classical models of aesthetics, founding its masterpieces, instead, on principles and standards of judgment produced in its own era. Thus the preponderance of manifestos (surrealism, futurism, dada, etc.) and the less than reverent relationships its masterpieces have with those of the classical era (*Ulysses*, *The Wasteland*, *Anathemata*, etc.). In the wake of a self-defined and self-enclosed aesthetic movement, the resources with which to approach the 'great works' it has produced are often left inside the

hermetically sealed world in which they were created. Habermas is keenly aware of this danger, writing ‘when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow’ (11).

In terms of aesthetic modernity in particular, Habermas introduces it with an incredibly succinct definition revolving around one of its most salient characteristics.

Aesthetic modernity is characterized by attitudes which find a common focus in a changed consciousness of time. This time consciousness expresses itself through metaphors of the vanguard and the avant-garde. The avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future. (5)

This is a complex idea, not least because the concept of a ‘changed consciousness of time’ is often linked more to *phenomenological* rather than cultural reception of the world (a point made murkier by the fact that Habermas explicitly links this time-consciousness to Bergson). Making the reasonable assumption that Habermas is speaking of a changed *awareness* of time consciousness, or, to put it another way, a changed reflective consciousness of time, we can see this assessment as being another perspective on the concepts of innovation and perpetual newness implicit in the term ‘modern’ itself, and a new way of looking at the concept of limits in artistic creation: more than just dissatisfaction with status-quo or formal experimentation for its own sake we can cast the exploration of formal limits in art as a product of an exploratory consciousness of time, one which sees the process of artistic reception and creation as unfolding on the ever-expanding horizon. This sense of being at the vanguard is, of course, a reflection of the techno-scientific and political upheavals coterminous with the outset and decline of modernism, but Habermas sees the art of this period as indicative of another, contradictory desire:

The new time consciousness [...] does more than express the experience of mobility in society, of acceleration in history, of discontinuity in everyday life. The new value placed in the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present. (5)

This is Habermas' version of the disjunction to which we will return in various guises in the course of this introduction: the contradiction between the search for expressive limits understood as a drive for novelty and its attendant focus on iterative limits on an ever-expanding continuum, and the search for limits understood as a drive to create 'the last work' and its attendant focus on the creation of an absolute. In Habermas' analysis there is no contradiction between these two interpretations, as, in *aesthetic* modernity, in particular the avant-garde, the artistic reflection of the discontinuity and acceleration that accompanied the advent of modernism is only a veil for a deeper, reactionary impulse towards stability. From this perspective, the inherently fragmentary form of *Finnegans Wake* could be viewed as a superficial response to the fragmentation of time consciousness accompanying technological modernization, the accompanying shrinkage of the relatable world and the urge for stability reflected in the syntonic *Dubliners* at the core of its plot. Similar moves could, of course, be made with regards to the other two works this paper will examine: their formal innovations ascribable to reflections of the fragmentary world of modernity from which they sprang, and their accompanying drive towards universality and the absolute ascribable to an underlying longing for stability. This reading is worth keeping in mind going forwards, as we will come across alternate accounts of this disjunction.

This consciousness of time is, of course, only one of the many shifts accompanying modernity and its aesthetic world, and if we follow Habermas a little further in his essay we will come across another of the concerns mentioned above: that of the differentiation between artist, spectator and critic. As Habermas observes, "[t]he reception of art by the layman or by the

'everyday expert' goes in a different direction than the reception of art by the professional critic”

(12). Using an idea of Albrecht Wellmer's, Habermas shows one key difference between the expert and non-expert experience of art, writing that;

as soon as [an aesthetic] experience is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems, it enters into a language game which is no longer that of the aesthetic critic. The aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another.” (13)

In a sort of literalist distortion of the Kantian notion of disinterest, Habermas here places the aesthetic experience’s ability to create links between both normative and cognitive interpretations of the life-world as necessarily outside the domain of αἴσθησις. This effectively splits aesthetics in two: the moment an aesthetic experience becomes ‘meaningful’, i.e., capable of transforming our formal normative and cognitive interpretive apparatus, it is banished from the realm of critical analysis, elevated, in Habermas’ view, to a ‘more functional’ realm. For Habermas, one of the consequences of modernity’s Enlightenment-era inspired project of the immanent development of the spheres of culture is the exacerbation this split between critical and life-world influencing aesthetic experience: “What accrues to culture through specialized treatment and reflection does not immediately and necessarily become the property of everyday praxis” (9). While Habermas believes that true modern/Enlightenment thought should revolve around the production of more ‘authentic’ (i.e., capable of being deployed in the life-world as opposed to rarefied academia) aesthetic experiences, his division is an important point regarding the relative subjective positions of critic/spectator/artist and the values accorded to each in terms of aesthetic reception and creation.

Habermas sees the failure of modernity in general most powerfully reflected in the failures of modernist aesthetics, in particular surrealism as a reaction against an increasingly

rarified and autonomous artistic/critical world. For Habermas, surrealism was primarily an attempt to ‘force a reconciliation of art and life’ (11) into a world where ‘art had become a critical mirror, showing the irreconcilable nature of the aesthetic and the social worlds’ (10). Although Habermas chooses surrealism as his particular example, we can easily extrapolate his formulae to apply to any avant-garde modernist tradition, particularly those concerned with returning art to the life-world through effacement of the boundaries between aesthetic judgment and subjective experience and between artistic creation and quotidian activity. Although none of the works under consideration here sprang fully formed from artistic ‘movements’ per se, this category is still relevant, as each is in some way rooted in an attempt to *revitalize* its medium, Joyce’s art always concerned with the reintegration of the details of life, often in raw factual form, into art, Eisenstein’s historical epics with (secretly) the integration of political critique into political propaganda, and Stockhausen’s work with revitalising the austerity of serialism with a variety of stochastic or merely playful considerations of human limitations. While none of these works fit the model precisely, it will be useful to consider Habermas’ take on the failures of surrealism in light of these features.

All those attempts to level art and life, fiction and praxis, appearance and reality to one plane; the attempts to remove the distinction between artifact and object of use, between conscious staging and spontaneous excitement [...] These experiments have served to bring back to life, and to illuminate all the more glaringly, exactly those structures of art which they were meant to dissolve. They gave legitimacy, as ends in themselves, to appearance as the medium of fiction, to the transcendence of the artwork over society, to the concentrated and planned character of artistic production as well as to the special cognitive status of the judgment of taste. (11)

This transition from spontaneity to stasis via the institutionalisation or mainstreaming of art is a familiar story, but perhaps more important here is Habermas’ link between formal experimentation (the intended collapse of the distinction between artifact and object) and the

reaffirmation of the special cognitive status of the judgment of taste and the re-ascendency of the artwork as specialized object. The explicit link between these is, of course, portrayed as a *failure* of modernism, predicated on Habermas' particular readings of authentic (valuable) aesthetic experiences as those capable of creating synthesis between normative and cognitive interpretations in all realms of the life-world, but even outside this particular judgment it is an important perspective on the story of modernism. The 'dominant but dead' theme raised by Hal Foster (quoting Habermas) is relevant to this paper in that one of the crucial questions facing critics of, in particular *Finnegans Wake*, but in general most complex modernist works, is their transformation into flat signifiers for, at best, modernist greatness, or, more usually, the quixotic nature of the modernist drive towards innovation or limits.

Before moving on to some of Agamben's ideas on this and other topics, I will briefly summarize some of the relevant questions and thought-figures Habermas brings to the consideration of modernity in general, and the works at hand in particular. First, the concept of perpetual innovation embodied by the edict 'make it new', can be understood in terms of a changed consciousness of time, and, furthermore, this edict or attitude carries with it its inversion into either stasis in the form of institutionalization or, in a more specifically Habermasian reading, it already contains its own negation in the form of a latent longing for stability and permanence. Second, the question of the role of the critic versus the artist versus the lay-reader or spectator can be considered in terms not only of subjective response to art or creative impulse, but in terms of the ability of aesthetic judgment to transform the life-world, an issue which will always be plagued by the question of the authenticity of aesthetic judgments within and without the academy. Last, formal attempts to integrate the life-world into aesthetic creations have, historically, failed in that they have been transformed into static, rather than vital objects. The

museum, in other words, eventually absorbs attempts to circumvent its bounds.

While I will return to these points repeatedly in the course of this paper, for now it is important to remember in what context they will eventually serve. My interest is not to extrapolate outwards from my three artworks in order to make claims for aesthetic modernity in general; after all, part of my thesis is their place at the far end of a continuum, making any broad extrapolations somewhat statistically irrelevant. Rather, I would like to interpolate the readings of each work, developing new insights into their formal structure, as well as their general relation to certain pre-existent concepts such as the mathematical sublime, enriching both readings. As such, the concepts above will be made to function in increasingly specific ways as this paper progresses and my focus narrows to the particulars of each particular work and its creation and reception. While this will not completely excuse elisions of context unavoidable in a reading of a theorist such as Habermas in a paper of this size, I will endeavour to place each of the thinkers on whom I rely in virtual context with each other, however, in the hope that the interplay of concepts will reinforce the value of each. With that in mind, I will move ahead to an examination of the aesthetic theories of Giorgio Agamben.

Agamben

Near the conclusion of *An Incomplete Project*, Habermas reminds his readers that one of the symptoms of overextension of any particular sphere of culture into another domain is the rise of ‘terroristic activities’, and while he is clearly referring to the more literal form of terrorism he associates with the suturing of aesthetics to politics or the dogmatization of doctrine, we can hear in that phrase an echo of the division between the ‘rhetoricians’ and the ‘terrorists’ in Jean Paulhan's in *Les fleurs de Tarbes*. This text serves as an important touchstone for Giorgio

Agamben in his *The Man Without Content*, where he explains that according to Paulhan there are two kinds of writers:

the Rhetoricians, who dissolve all meaning into form and make form into the sole law of literature, and the Terrorists, who refuse to bend to this law and instead pursue the opposite dream of a language that would be nothing but meaning, of a thought in whose flame the sign would be fully consumed, putting the writer face to face with the absolute. (8)

This figuration is, in some ways, a synchronic mirror of the diachronic divisions in the development of aesthetic modernity to which Habermas refers above: the attempts to efface the gap between art and life and the difference between artifact and object akin to the Terroristic path, and the Rhetoricians embodying the, for Habermas, inevitable outcome wherein art is reintegrated into its separate aesthetic category. The other link to Habermas here is the concept of purity and the absolute being linked strongly to the ‘Terroristic’ type of writer. The tendency of avant-garde artists to search for the limits of expression in their media is linked to an associated desire for the production of a different type of form than is usually associated with, another version of the same twinned concepts of the end and beginning of art, of genesis and the absolute, but here presented in terms of the longing to *embody* the medium in which one works, taking it to its most complete and perfect possibility, and the desire to *transform* that medium, making ones’ artistic productions function as new types of objects. Agamben explains:

That the work of art is something other than what is simple in it is almost too obvious. This is what the Greeks expressed with the concept of allegory: the work of art ἄλλο ἀγορεύει, communicates something else, is something other than the material that contains it. But there are objects – for example, a block of stone, a drop of water, and generally all natural objects – in which form seems to be determined and almost cancelled out by matter, and other objects – a vase, a spade, or any other man-made object – in which form seems to be what determines matter. The dream of the Terror is to create works that are in the world in the same way as the block of stone or the drop of water; it is the dream of a *product* that exists according to the statute of the *thing*. ‘Les chef’s-d’oeuvres sont bêtes,’ wrote Flaubert; ‘ils ont la mine tranquille comme les productions même de la nature, comme les grands animaux et les montagnes.’ (8-9)

The works which are the focus of this study have a complex relationship with this division. Many of the giants of modernism, such as Joyce and Eisenstein, have works which often function like featureless objects in the public imagination, flat signifiers for greatness with no content besides their size and stature. Without resorting to authorial intentionality just yet, however, is it within the scope of reason to imagine *those* particular modernists yearning for an object functioning like those 'stupid, placid' productions of nature? It seems more appropriate in this context to see the division (as presented here) between aesthetic object as flat and aesthetic objects as something which may depend on the particular world in which it is received. Applying Habermas' logic to this split leaves us with an estimation of the value of each drive dependent on its ability to function as transformative of the life-world, something which, for him, occurs outside the realm of aesthetics qua critical aesthetics, and for Agamben this split is as well indicative of a division in the role of art and its critical and non-critical reception.

Just as Habermas sees the aesthetic-critical reception of art taking place in a separate, 'less authentic' stream of formal discourse, Agamben sees the emergence of aesthetic criticism as we know it today comes as a by-product of the emergence of a specific kind of artistic work. In his relation of the allegorical tale of Frenhofer in Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, who for Agamben is the perfect example of Paulhan's Terrorist, Agamben shows how Frenhofer's attempt to paint the perfect portrait, one which would live in the realm of things not abstractions or representations, ends with his vision of the perfect painting he has created shattered by the two observers for whom the painting is nothing but a mass of colour and confusion.

So long as no other eye contemplated his masterpieces, he did not doubt his success for one moment; but one look at the canvas through the eyes of his two spectators is enough for him to appropriate [their] opinion: 'Nothing! Nothing! And I worked on this for ten years'. Frenhofer becomes double. He moves from the point of view of the artist to that of the spectator, from the interested *promesse*

de bonheur to disinterested *aesthetics*. In this transition, the integrity of his work dissolves. For it is not only Frenhofer that becomes double, but his work as well [...] his work alternately presents two sides that cannot be put back together into a unity. (11)

This split, the incorporation of the spectator, and the subsequent ability of the creator to see his own work from the position of disinterestedness (in the critical/objective, not Kantian sense) represents for Agamben the problematic moment of genesis for modern aesthetics proper, and can serve as an introduction to the relevant concepts in his thought. Frenhofer, the Terroristic artist, in his attempt to make an object that transcends his medium, turns himself inward to such an extent that the sudden interruption of the spectators shocks him into an entirely outside perspective, that of the disinterested outsider, the critic. This parable presents a series of interesting assumptions about art, its creation and its reception, the most relevant for our purposes being the recapitulation of Habermas' perspective on the sundering in the history of art and aesthetics, and the importance of art being an authentic product of the life-world, not a formal experiment whose object is merely art itself. Agamben is working, of course, from a quite different conception of authenticity (a Heideggerian one, as we shall see), but the lesson he draws from this splitting is quite similar, and in the lengthy quotation that follows, he explains the causes and consequences of his diagnosis of modern art:

So long as the artist lives in intimate unity with his material, the spectator sees in the work of art only his own faith and the highest truth of his being brought to art in the most necessary manner, and a problem of art as such cannot arise since art is precisely the shared space in which all men, artists, and non-artists, come together in living unity. But once the creative subjectivity of the artists begins to place itself above his material and his production, [...] this shared concrete space of the work of art dissolves, and what the spectator sees in it is no longer something that he can immediately find again in his consciousness as his highest truth. Everything that the spectator can still find in the work of art is, now, mediated by aesthetic representation, which is itself, independently of any content, the supreme value and the most intimate truth that unfolds its power in the artwork itself and starting from the artwork itself . (36-37)

For Agamben art was once capable of disclosing a world by virtue of the artist's inseparability from his material: their shared place in the life-world guaranteeing transmission of aesthetic meaning, but for him the crucial moment of sundering comes as a result of the reflexive turn: once art takes itself as its object, aesthetics as a separate discourse is created and neither the artist nor art's role in society can return to the unified world. The figure of the Terrorist is, like the figure of the modern artist in Habermas, ultimately an ironic one: the drive towards creating a form unified with the life-world ends up affirming its opposite, creating an irreparable rift between the life-world and the realm of aesthetics. Although not explicitly cast in those terms, this version of the split between the modernist drive towards artistic innovation and the resulting distancing effect for the spectators and critics of this art owes much to Heidegger, particularly his concept of truth as ἀλήθεια, as disclosedness. For Heidegger, ἀλήθεια was literally ἀ-λήθεια, or un-concealedness: the process by which the world discloses itself to the subject from within an already interpreted and interpreting backdrop of meaning. While this theme of disclosure of world, and truth as a process by which something is un-concealed is clearly present in some form in Habermas it is more explicit here. After introducing the theme of the sublime below, I will return to this idea of the life-world and the disclosing of worlds, but for now it is merely important to note that these themes are clearly similar to those found in Habermas above: the question of modern aesthetics coming into being is oriented around the concepts of the division between artist, critic, and spectator, the mediation of aesthetic representation or theoretical perspective as representing a less authentic version of the incorporation or disclosure of artistic truth in the life world, a sense that there was a more pristine era to which we cannot return (although this is certainly a complex point for both thinkers) and the emphasis on the sundering effect of the creative artist's reflexive self-orientation as a product of the formal-innovative drive

of modern aesthetics. Agamben's take on this split is complex and far-ranging, but we can see it as having three distinct outcomes: the critical implications, the implications for spectatorship, and the implications for the work itself. We will briefly look at each of these in turn in order to glean what concepts we can in light of the topic at hand.

Agamben is deeply pessimistic as to the potential for creation of authentic meaning from aesthetic criticism as things stand, going so far as to write:

Wherever the critic encounters art, he brings it back to its opposite, dissolving it in non-art; wherever he exercises his reflection, he brings with him nonbeing and shadow, as though he had no other means to worship art than the celebration of a kind of black mass in honor of the *deus inversus*, the inverted god, of non-art. (45-46)

This critical ruination or inversion of art is one of the fallouts of the irreversibility of the moment when art turns to itself for a subject and the 'immediate unity the artist's subjectivity with his material breaks' (35). The formal tools of aesthetic analysis are all we are left with in the absence of a unified life-world and Agamben, taking Kant as the clearest explicator of these tools, finds them lacking. For Agamben the formal principles with which to measure art or assess beauty in form in general have the ironic property of being the only means by which we might know a work of art as such, but not allowing us to experience it, and instead pointing us to its shadow, the representation of art created by our own reflective judgment. We will return to this point in the chapter below on Kant's aesthetics, but for our purposes here it is important to note the similarly negative conflation of the failures of aesthetic judgment as a human faculty and aesthetic analysis as a critical activity. Aesthetic criticism is for both Agamben and Habermas, not only sundered from the life-world by virtue of the modern split in aesthetics, but definitively on the side of inauthentic disclosure of worlds, against the truth revealing powers of art, it seems.

As for the spectator, the loss of the unified life-world in which a work of art produced by

an artist in unison with his material resulted in the impossibility of a work whose meaning would be intelligible and workable, i.e., having the energetic characteristic of being able to transform the spectator without needing the intermediate negation into non-art represented by criticism. Without this negation (which, in the absence of an alternative, Agamben grudgingly admits can serve to imbue art with some meaning, even in the confines of a museum), the spectator is left on the far side of the divide left in the wake of this sundering:

This means that what is essential for the spectator in the work of art is precisely what is alien to him and deprived of essence, while what he sees of himself in the work, that is, the content he perceives, appears to him no longer as a truth that finds its necessary expression in the work, but rather as something of which he is already perfectly aware as a thinking subject, and which therefore he can legitimately believe himself capable of expressing. (47)

This concept of the work being deprived of essence within a particular disclosed world is important both for the concept of *particular worlds* in which a work might or might not disclose certain truths or aesthetic impressions, but also for the important extension of the idea of the spectator only finding that in a work which she has put into it herself. Agamben does go on to ‘solve’ this impasse and suggest a manner in which aesthetics can replace tradition in the role of reuniting the spectator with art in a manner not dissimilar to Heidegger’s insistence at the end of *The Question Concerning Technology* that art will be the key to negating the deleterious effect of τέχνη as a mode of revealing of our ability to perceive the world properly, but his solutions still maintains the negating effect of criticism and the dangers of the type of artistic reception outlined in the passage above.

The artist, or his world, is of course the cause of the initial sundering that, for Agamben, placed us in this position, and the productions of the artist are, after this split, and after the rise of modern technoscientific world and its productions and reproductions with which the world of the

modern artist is coterminous, the production and meaning of the work of art is greatly changed. In a reading which reveals Agamben's critical origins as a devout reader of both Benjamin and Heidegger, he traces the path from ancient to modern times of the status of the *availability* of the work of art in terms of its originality. Agamben writes that 'originality means that the work of art [...] maintains with its formal principle [its ἀρχή] such a relation of proximity as excludes the possibility that its entry into presence may be in some way reproducible' (61). This is to be opposed, of course, to those objects which are produced in the mode of τέχνη, especially in the modern times which for Heidegger and Agamben represent the full coming into being of the character of τέχνη as a mode of revealing. Before moving forward it is worth pausing here to remark on the usefulness of the concept of the originality of the work of art being linked to its proximity to its ἀρχή. This concept is returned to by Agamben in his development of the concepts of architectonics (as, etymologically and conceptually, the production [τίκτω] of beginnings [ἀρχή]) and rhythm, both of which will figure in my analysis of Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, a work much concerned with both architectonics and the concept of originality. The question here, however, for *Gruppen* or any other modern work, able to be experienced in a variety of settings and a variety of formats, is whether this originality carries with it any of the irreproducibility and energy the concept seems to imply.² In a version of the paradoxical effect of modernism's attempt to escape the confines of artistic restriction we saw in Habermas, Agamben argues that the focus on originality that came as a side effect of the reflexive turn in art in effect serves to diminish the possibility of the 'original work' having any of the impact on its spectators that its originality and vitalism is meant to. This vitalism Agamben links to the Aristotelian idea of ἐνέργεια, the being-at-work of a work which draws its spectators into its aesthetic sphere.

Instead of promoting this energetic impulse, the ‘original’ work of art in the modern era instead ‘makes itself available’ for consumption: even without being produced under the aegis of τέχνη and reproduction, Agamben sees the work of as *necessarily* falling into this mode:

“Wherever a work of art is produced and exhibited today, its *energetic* aspect, that is, the being-at-work of the work, is erased to make room for its character as a stimulant of the aesthetic sentiment, as mere support of aesthetic enjoyment. In the work of art, in other words, the dynamic character of its availability for aesthetic enjoyment obscures the *energetic* character of its final station in its own shape. [...] *the split in the unitary status of man's pro-ductive availability marks in reality his passage from the sphere of ἐνέργεια to that of δύναμις, from being-at-work to mere potentiality.*” (66)³

Again the split in the ability of the artist to be unified with his world results in the obscuration of the meaning of a work of art qua poetic meaning, transforming it into a mere product. This, of course, raises interesting points for the concept of a work like *Finnegans Wake* which seems to fluctuate between completely occupying the sphere of ἐνέργεια in that it is seen by so many as a machine for producing artistic meaning, and δύναμις, in that it is alternatively seen as the ultimate triumph of eisegesis over exegesis. Agamben would seem to vote for the first, as he considers the ‘open work’ to be in some ways the quintessential ‘available work’:

The rise of the poetics of the open work and of the work-in-progress, founded not on energetic but on a dynamic status of the work of art, signifies precisely this extreme moment of the exile of the work of art from its essence, the moment in which – having become pure potentiality, mere being-available in itself and for itself – it consciously takes on its own inability to possess itself in its own εἶδος as in its end, work that is never at work, that is (if it is true that work is ἐνέργεια) nonwork, δύναμις, availability, and potentiality. (66)

Given what we have read both in Agamben and Habermas however, it is easy to see how, especially in the examples of the *Wake*, *Ivan*, and *Gruppen*, how this extreme inclination towards potentiality and availability can be transformed, not into ἐνέργεια, but stasis. The question of

³ Italics in the original. Unless noted, all italicized quotations are as in original.

whether or not the ‘big, dumb’ works of modernism ever embodied the principles of *ἐνέργεια* will come down to a solution of the impasse between their radical, and meaningless openness, and the absolute closure accompanying their transformation into museum pieces: mute and remote. With the critical concepts and framework loosely provided by Habermas and Agamben, the contours of this impasse can be seen to develop around the notions of subjectivity and critical aesthetics, with both rather pessimistic as to this possibility, making their presences here as lead ups to a suggestion of the use of a Kantian aesthetic category slightly odd. However, in another procataleptical moment, I will suggest that it is precisely these sorts of critical impasses which call for the deployment of new concepts, and the leveraging of old ones for new purposes. In that spirit, I will turn to the final reader of aesthetic modernity in this introduction, Alain Badiou.

Badiou

Alain Badiou’s *The Century* has as its stated aim an examination of the twentieth century on its own terms: by using concepts and thematics of the century to analyze its own historical situation. In terms of aesthetics Badiou asks “[f]rom the standpoint of the works of art which it showed itself capable of producing, what did the century declare with regard to the singularities of art?” (131). His answer, or rather, the answer he discerns the century as providing, is complex, but first let us consider the method itself and its implications. Unlike Habermas and Agamben, who approach the question of modernity, and therefore the century, through a specific, given set of theoretical assumptions, Badiou attempts to think through the problems of aesthetic modernity with the tools it itself provides. This is not merely a ‘cute’ theoretical move, it is a statement on the nature of modernity and its inclination, unique in history thus far, to seek truth through a type of intensification of practice: self-reference as artistic apotheosis. The method is essentially

modernist. This echoes Agamben's claims as to the sundering in aesthetic history concurrent with art becoming oriented towards itself, but Badiou's perspective on this split is very different, although, as with Habermas, the core observations remain constant. Badiou's take on the quest for absolutism, for limits, is focused on the concept of the definitive:

“One of the century's obsessions was that of obtaining something definitive. One can observe this obsession at work even in the most abstract regions of science. Just think of the mathematical endeavor that goes by the name of *Bourbaki*, which seeks to build a mathematical monument that will be integrally formalized, complete and definitive. In art, it is thought that by putting an end to the relativity of imitations and representations absolute art will be obtained, the art that shows itself integrally as art; an art that – taking its own process as its object – is the exposition of what is artistic in art; the articulation, within art, of the end of art itself. In short: the last work of art, in the form of art unworked. (36)

Here we have two of the themes presented above: formal models for interpretation, and the concept of limits, the latter being modified, however, with the addition of a new concept, that of the end of art. This Hegelian concept, to which we will return, is important for understanding Badiou's version of the century. The sense of finality accompanying any push towards a limit or absolute version of a concept, object or experience, particularly an aesthetic one, does not necessarily need to be thought of in chronological/historical terms. In fact, it is most often processed as an immanent situational limit, attendant to the particularities of a subjective experience unfolding in one's particular world, such as limit experiences involving tolerable decibel limits in the performances of La Monte Young. This other, historically oriented sense of ending is, however a particularly modernist concern, and one which adds another dimension to the concept of limit works. To return to *Finnegans Wake*, we have a work that not only can be experienced subjectively as involving limits of comprehension and the possibilities of expression, but acts as a strike through literary history: ‘après moi...’.

Alberto Toscano, in his introduction to *The Century*, addresses this dividing line in his

reading of Beckett's 'Dante ... Bruno. Vico ... Joyce' from the famous *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, the collection of *Finnegans Wake* criticism released prior even to Joyce finishing the work. An essay in which Beckett, according to Toscano had,

already discerned something that would end up serving as the counter to his own linguistic strategies of 'leasting' and 'worsting': a saturation and corporealization of language, the transformation of the store of universal language into an inexhaustible, quasi-somatic reservoir of affective materials, symbolic allusions, delectable opacities.' (x)

Beckett, in other words, created his minimalist argot as a response to the impasse created by the limit situation of *Finnegans Wake*, his 'leasting' a response to the maximalist intensification of textuality that the *Wake* represented as a response to a similar problem. Toscano outlines some of these problems, writing that

[t]he problems that Beckett some seventy years ago discerned in *Finnegans Wake* – What is to be done with the English language? How can it be creatively manipulated, stripped or reconfigured? Can it be universalized *against* its status as the 'common currency' of global transactions (but without slipping into platitudinous and reactionary jeremiads against 'Americanism' or 'globish')? – are still with us today. (xi-xii)

These issues of language are accompanied by a problem Badiou addresses in *The Century*, that of the century's impasse between the 'end of art' and its beginning. Both Beckett and Joyce strove to create the type of newness and limit experiences associated with the avant-garde and aesthetic modernity as a whole, but, one following the other, ended in opposing strategies, and while I will be focusing on maximalist expressions of this drive towards, it is important to remember that the question of 'what one can do after *Finnegans Wake*?' can easily be inverted, or transformed into 'What can one do after 4'33'?', or for that matter, *Watt*. When Badiou writes that "[u]ltimately, the problem of the century is to exist in the non-dialectical conjunction of the

theme of the end and that of beginning” (37) he is not, of course, speaking exclusively of the problems of modern aesthetics, but the constant themes of ‘end of art’ and ‘make it new’ make his thesis easily applicable within that realm, as *Finnegans Wake*, and, as we shall see further on, critical reactions to it, make evident.

In terms of formal analysis of the aesthetic content of the century, many of Badiou’s other observations are superficially akin to Agamben’s. Like Agamben, he is attentive to art’s inward turn, its preoccupation with aesthetics and its own process of becoming. He also, as both Habermas and Agamben do, links this concept of the inward turn to temporal awareness and subjective/creative temporal shifts, observing that, “[i]n various ways, the entire century saw itself as a constructivist century, a vision which implies the staging of a voluntary construction of time” (p.105). This voluntary construction of time, cognate with the changed sense of internal time discussed by Habermas is, in Badiou’s writing, the concept around which we might gather the disparate thematics of modernity presented thus far. Writing that,

[t]wentieth-century art is the attestation of beginning as the intense presence of art, as its pure present, as the immediacy and presentness of its capacity. *The tendency of twentieth century art is to revolve around the act rather than the work*, because the act, as the intense power of beginning, can only be thought in the present. (136)

Badiou here conjoins the themes of perpetual newness, the end of art, the search for absolutes, and art’s inward turn. Like Agamben, Badiou sees these characteristics as evidence of a split in the history of aesthetics, but his judgments on their value are far different.

Commentators, who for the most part can be counted among the partisans of the current Restoration [...] often maintain that ‘contemporary art’ (a bizarre expression, if we consider that sometimes we are talking about works, like those of Schoenberg, Duchamp, or Malevich, that are almost a century old) was ‘dogmatic’, or even ‘terroristic’. They can go ahead and call the passion for the real ‘Terror’, I won’t object; but when they denounce what they deem to be an obstinate preoccupation with formal *a priori* they’re guilty of spectacular idiocy. Quite the reverse, the century is marked by an unprecedented variability in its

imperatives of construction and ornamentation, being enticed not by the slow historical movement of the equilibrium of forms, but by the urgency of this or that experimental formalization.” (156)

This is an important distinction to keep in mind going forward: formal innovation, particularly in the vein characteristic of late modernism, is occasionally characterized as having as its object a conformity to some *a priori* model of an aesthetic absolute; Agamben is guilty of this in his insistence on the concreteness of the aesthetic desiderata for the ‘Terrorists’ and their reflexive formal innovation, as is Habermas with his insistence on the latent desire for pristine forms. Rather, keeping in mind Badiou’s insistence on the *non-dialectical* nature of the relationship between ‘the beginning’ and ‘the end’ of art in modernist aesthetics, we should characterize this push towards the limits of expression as taking place within the context of a continuous and ever expanding drive to create new forms. Habermas and Agamben’s insistence on viewing the legacy of modernity in terms of formalism vs. ‘usefulness’ leads them into a dialectic derived from viewing the formal experimentation endemic to aesthetic modernity as bloodless abstraction, an example of art excised from the body politic, which they oppose to the potential of art to be a uniting (and politicizing) factor in the life-world, a potential tied to its movement *away* from abstraction and formal experimentation. Badiou, of course, strongly opposes this, writing,

Formalization is basically the great unifying power behind all the century’s undertakings – from mathematics (formal logics) to politics (the Party as *a priori* form of any collective action), by way of art, be it prose (Joyce and the odyssey of forms), painting (Picasso, the inventor of a suitable formalization in the face of every occurrence of the visible) or music [the polyvalent formal construction of Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*]. But in ‘formalization’, the word ‘form’ is not to be opposed to ‘matter’ or ‘content’, but is instead coupled to the real of the act. (160)

This linking of the formal experimentation of Joyce, Eisenstein and Stockhausen to ‘the real of the act’ is best explained by backtracking to a concept brought up earlier in this introduction, that

of the infinite in its Romantic, versus modernist conception. As mentioned above, the drive towards the exploration of expressible limits on two fronts, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, as exemplified by *The Wake*, *Ivan*, and *Gruppen* is in some ways akin to the Romantic duality between fragmentation and universality. This drive is also concerned with representing the infinite and the infinitesimal in terms of finite complexity's relationship to the infinite when said complexity surpasses the limits of human perception, usually in terms of the Kantian axis of comprehension versus apprehension. Where these works break radically from modernism is in terms of the relationship between the formal figuration of this linking of finite to infinite. Badiou defines Romanticism primarily through its relationship to the infinite, laying the ground for understanding how the formal experimentation of aesthetic modernity differentiates itself:

What is romanticism? [...] a) Art is the descent of the infinity of the Ideal into the finitude of the work. The artist, elevated by genius, is the sacrificial medium of this descent. [...] Since in the end it's the work that bears witness to the incarnation of the infinite, romanticism cannot avoid making the work sacred. b) The artist lifts subjectivity to the heights of the sublime by testifying that it possesses the power to mediate between reality and the Ideal. Just as the work is sacred so is the artist sublime. What we are here calling 'romanticism' is an aesthetic religion [...]. (153-154)

Here, organized around the categories of the work itself and the artist as creative subject, are the two Romantic themes I wish to address as they manifest in late modernist works: the infinite and the sublime. The key points to take from this quotation before we move on to its modernist negation are the fact that the infinite is conceived of in unavoidable divine terms, the second being that, given this incarnation of the descent of the infinite is through a human medium, Badiou believes that it is the artist who suffers sublimity: the difference between the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* in the presence of this numinous evocation of infinity is

oriented around its conjurer. This is a rather strange, very non-Kantian phrasing of the concept of the sublime, and I am choosing to parse it as meaning that it is the *figure* of the artist which evokes the sublime in the spectator's subjectivity, rather than as meaning that the artist-god sees the sublime as an immanent condition transubstantiating the infinite into its finite artistic form. Regardless of which reading one chooses to make, the Romantic figure of the infinite is differentiated from the modern by its unavoidably divine providence, whereas "the twentieth century is no doubt the first to set itself the objective of an atheist art, of a truly materialist art [...]." (p.154) In Badiou's writing in general, 'atheistic' is usually a code for 'engaging with a post-Cantor, non-mystical sense of the infinite', and although there is an element of that usage here, he is also referring to the changed locus of sublimity in modernism. Despite this shift from a religious version of the thinking (or inscribing) of the infinite in art, difficulties remain:

How can art assume the compulsory finitude of its means while incorporating the infinity of Being into its thinking? Romanticism proposes that art is precisely the coming of this infinity into the finite body of the work. But it can only do so at the price of a kind of generalized Christianity. If we are to break with this latent religiosity, we need to discover another articulation of the finite and the infinite. This is what the century proved incapable of doing, collectively and programmatically – oscillation as it did between the perpetuation of a romantic subjectivity that would harbor the infinite within itself, at least as a programme for emancipation, and the integral sacrifice of the infinite, which is actually the elimination of art as a form of thought. The torment of contemporary art in the face of the infinite situates it between a programmatic forcing that announces the return of romantic pathos, on the one hand, and a nihilistic iconoclasm, on the other. (154-155)

Before moving on to possible solutions to this impasse, it is worth pausing here to recapitulate the problematic Badiou has introduced here. Romanticism is marked by its relationship to the infinite: its descent into the finite of art as a sort of divine manifestation, the artist as sublime avatar and conduit of the infinite. Modernism, in contrast, oscillates between a recapitulation of the romantic programme, transposed to a model of emancipation ('transformative' art, ie, the

models of life-world integrated art Habermas sees modernity as capable of prior to their inevitable fall into abeyance in the ossuary of history we can broadly label ‘the museum’. In Agamben’s model, the Terrorists) or discarded completely: ‘nothing is art’ contra ‘everything is art’ leading to a nihilistic disavowal of the infinite. Badiou’s solution to this impasse arises from

acting as if the infinite were nothing but the finite, once the latter is conceived not in its objective finitude, but in the act from whence it arises. There is no separate or ideal infinite. The infinite is not captured *in* form; it *transmits through form*. If it is an event – if it is *what happens* – finite form can be equivalent to an infinite opening.’ (155)

The possibility of finite form evoking the infinite, being *transmitted* through the finite, is a necessary predicate for my argument regarding the evocation of the mathematical sublime, and although Badiou does not specifically tie this possibility to any modernist works I will argue that the *Wake*, *Ivan*, and *Gruppen* are perfect examples of this possibility of finite transmission of the infinite. This infinite opening as a possible resolution of the modernist impasse or oscillation mentioned above is not, for Badiou, related to any Kantian programme however, but instead to the Hegelian differentiation between the ‘good; and the ‘bad infinite’, concepts which with Badiou thinks modernism’s engagement with the concepts of the ‘end’ and ‘beginning’ of art with which this introduction has been preoccupied.

Badiou begins his discussion of Hegel’s concept of the infinite by claiming that “[T]he philosopher should note that the century is engaged in a constant debate with Hegel around the theme of the ‘end of art’ (156-157). He goes on to explain while this debate is not the direct one that occurred in the philosophical response to Hegel, it is still a vital one in which the meaning of the infinite and its expression in art is determined. Through a close reading of the ‘Quantitative Infinity’ section of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Badiou explains how Hegel’s notion of the infinite’s roots in the finite are rooted in his understanding of repetition and becoming as central

characteristics of the finite. This seems paradoxical at first, but is easy to understand if we regard the idea of the infinite much as we do the scientific notion of c (the speed of light): a constant from which our units and perceptions are derived. Looking at the quantitative infinite as a static constant, we can then understand Hegel's notion of the finite as repetition and becoming.

Badiou's comments on this concept are as follows:

The synthetic definition [of quantitative infinity] proposed by Hegel (I will borrow his vocabulary here) is that (the quantum's) infinity comes to be when the act of self-overcoming is once again taken up into itself. Hegel adds that in this moment the infinite exceeds the sphere of the quantitative and becomes the qualitative, becomes 'a pure quality of the finite itself'. In other words, just as in contemporary art's presentation of its real concept, the infinite is effectively a qualitative determination of the finite. (157)

This 'pure quality' of the infinite can emerge through a process of the finite 'overcoming itself', its immanent and defining characteristic of repetition surpasses itself in order to produce the infinite. The emergence of the infinite from the finite is central to my claim that a demonstrably finite work of art can evoke a sense of the infinite both in its presentation and specific critical and readerly responses to it. Although Badiou does not fully work out his analysis of Hegel's infinite in the course of *The Century*, its fullest figuration can be found in Meditation Fifteen of his magnum opus, *Being and Event*. Although a full analysis of this incredibly dense chapter does not have a place here, I will provide a brief outline of his reading, along with an explanation of some of the vocabulary of *Being and Event* as it speaks directly to my use of the concept of the infinite.

As outlined in the first chapter of his *Being and Event*, Badiou believes that Being is multiple in its presentation and oneness exists as an *operation* performed on this multiple, an operation he terms the 'count-as-one'.⁴ So Being is neither multiple, as the multiple is simply

⁴ "Operation" in this case being a term much closer to the sense of an operation in mathematics than in usual

the ‘regime of presentation’ for being, nor is it one, since the one is simply the result of an operation performed on the multiple of presentation. Badiou calls this presented multiplicity a Situation and a *particular* operation of counting-as-one that makes it legible for us a Structure.⁵ Structures are how we experience the world, as products of our subjective experience of counting as one, and situations are the presented multiplicity of Being that we can read as prior to this operation through what Badiou calls subtractive ontology: an ontological move that abstracts or subtracts from presentation back to Being.⁶ With this vocabulary we can understand Badiou’s statement that “The ontological impasse proper to Hegel is fundamentally centred in his holding that there is a being of the One; or, more precisely, that *presentation generates structure*, that the pure multiple detains in itself the count-as-one” (*Being and Event*, 161). Badiou spends most of Meditation Fifteen showing how this difference between his ontology and Hegel’s can be illustrated through Hegel’s need to devalue mathematics in order to posit presentation rather than situations as generative of structure, but along the way provides some excellent summaries of the Hegelian concept of infinity and its uses, beginning with his statement that: “It would not be an exaggeration to say that all of Hegel can be found in the following: the ‘still-more’ is immanent to the ‘already’; everything that is, is already ‘still-more’ (162). Badiou is here appreciating how

philosophical discourse, the key concept here being that the operation of the count as one is not, for Badiou, a consistent operator, but rather merely “an operation”. We can think of this in terms of the * symbol used in algebra (especially group theory) when one needs to denote “any operation whatsoever”.

⁵ Again, we can think of this *particular* operation as being, for instance, analogous to how the operation of addition forms a group on \mathbb{Z} but not \mathbb{Z}^+ . The operation is variable and both determined *from* and determinate *of* the situation. This is important especially in light of Badiou’s work in *Logics of Worlds* that these operators, like in algebra, generate sets or, in his vocabulary, structures, with different properties, analogous to those found in mathematics: commutative, associative etc.

⁶ Badiou’s movement from there to his concept of mathematics as ontology (the science of being qua being) is best understood in terms of his belief that it is the formal system that has gone furthest in investigating the multiple as such. “If we suppose only one idea, it is this idea, I believe that if all creative thought is in reality the invention of a new mode of formalization, then that thought is the invention of a form. Thus if every creative thought is the invention of a new form, then it will also bring new possibilities of asking, in the end “what is a form”? If this is true then one should investigate the resources for this. As a resource there is nothing deeper than what mathematics has to offer.” And he adds, “It is not that mathematics is the most important.” Before going on to conclude that it is merely that, “mathematics holds something of the secret of thinking” (*The Concept of Model*, 102).

Hegel founded the necessity of the infinite on a definition of the finite: the repetition endemic to finitude containing an immanent limit beyond which lies the stability of the infinite.⁷ He elaborates through a commentary on the passages on the infinite in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, beginning with the point that, for Hegel "the passage from the pure limit (*Grenze*) to the frontier⁸ (*Schranke*) forms the resource of an infinity directly *required* by the point of being" (162). In Hegel's *Logic*, this passage from limit to frontier or border, this *requirement* obtains in the form of the "ought", the deontological imperative by which the finite exceeds itself. This "ought" is a simple function of being's immanent restricted by its own determination (*Bestimmung*). In other words, a subject's *Bestimmung* (determination, destiny, vocation) is both its immanent restriction (shaping what it *is*) as well as its "*elevation above its restriction*" (Hegel, 105). This formal concept of a subject's limitation being both its restriction and its becoming is central to Hegel, as Badiou highlights, and is expressed most purely in his concept of the infinite as both being and becoming: the bad, repetitive self-sublation of the finitude/infinity oscillation is, as process, the "true infinite" (109).

For our purposes at this point, the important concept is that the iterative nature of the finite not only *can* point towards the infinite, but it *must*, and that the "true infinite" arises not from iteration of repetition itself but from the infinitude of this process (the circle versus the line). Rather than look at this from the perspective of Being and Beings, we can (as Badiou does in *The Century*), contemplate how it allows finite works of art to suggest, through self-reference, transcendent ("good") repetition and complexity, the infinitude possessed by the finite. Just as importantly, this concept of finitude containing the grounds and necessity for the infinite

⁷ This is, of course, the Hegelian *generative* ontological perspective on infinity, to which Badiou will oppose his *subtractive* model.

⁸ Frontier is an idiosyncratic translation of *Schranke*, a word best translated in this context as border or boundary, Badiou himself translating it as *borne*.

provides us with a strong conceptual link to the phenomenological concept of facticity. Facticity, which can be strongly linked to the concept of “horizon” explained above, can be defined as that limit of phenomenological interpretation upon which our vision of the world is founded and against whose boundary our vision likewise is constrained. The model of a limiting factor against which frontiers are explored will feature repeatedly in various aspects of this paper.

My use of the Kantian concept of the mathematical sublime to investigate late-modernist exploration of the limits of artistic representation is based not only on those works’ suggestion of the infinite, but also in the inherent disconnect between apprehension and comprehension a reader or critic confronts in themselves while confronting the work. After investigating the sublime as a concept, I will be exploring some of the phenomenological vocabulary available for describing this impasse for the critic or reader, but alongside these two critical resources, The Hegelian concept of the infinite (and Badiou’s use of it) should be kept in mind, both as a suggestion of the possibilities of what we could call an ‘indexical’ relationship between the finite and the infinite, and as a formal model for the ways in which limits can contain their own surpassings. This model is crucial for the application of the Kantian sublime to art, a topic to which we will now turn.

2. The Mathematical Sublime

The use of the Kantian mathematical sublime in this paper is primarily as a heuristic with which to explain the formal complexity of certain late-modernist works of art. The function of a heuristic is to discover or uncover previously inaccessible aspects of an object or state of affairs and can be thought of here in conjunction with the concept of a model, or conceptual space which can help develop both the critical and artistic terms. The mathematical sublime serves as an excellent art-critical and meta-critical heuristic in that it draws attention to and provides definitions for a number of relevant formal elements: the difference between magnitude and quantity and the establishment of a comparative unit of measure, the differential between imagination and reason, apprehension versus comprehension of the infinite, the idea of limits of perception, the continuum of form and formlessness in objects, and, perhaps most importantly, the idea that a complex but finite object might suggest the infinite. All of the elements are important for my examination of the *Wake*, *Ivan*, and *Gruppen* because they allow certain aspects of those works to be foregrounded and compared. There is, however, an important difference between merely deploying Kant's mathematical sublime as one piece of conceptual terminology, and actively suggesting that these works *evoke the mathematical sublime*. The latter would involve either grafting the Kantian mathematical sublime onto a non-Kantian framework for the evocation of sublimity, or working within an explicitly Kantian framework but ignoring Kant's rejection of artworks as suitable for judgments of sublimity. Both of these possibilities are untenable.

The problem with the first possibility, that of grafting the Kantian sublime onto a more art-critical model of aesthetics, is that, although the sublime began with Longinus as a rhetorical

category, and appears in many incarnations outside of its Kantian one as an art-critical term, the particular concept extant in the third *Critique*, from which I have derived the above formal elements and concepts, is not readily relatable to these other concepts of the sublime. Part of this difficulty of integration stems from the fact that for Kant, the sublime is a category of aesthetic judgment intimately tied to his doctrine of the faculties—concepts developed at length in the course of all three critiques. We can define “faculty” as that which governs a relationship (or representation) between a subject and an object: the means by which this representation obtains. A major concern of Kant’s over the three Critiques is the question of, in Gilles Deleuze’s words, “whether each of these faculties is capable of a *higher form*. We may say that a faculty has a higher form when it finds *in itself* the law of its own exercise [...]. In its higher form, a faculty is thus autonomous” (*Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, 4). In the third Critique, Kant uses the analytic of the mathematical and dynamical sublime to explore the relationship between the faculties of cognition and desire, respectively; but this analytic is intimately related to the general exploration of the higher senses of faculties undertaken by all three of the Critiques, and is therefore difficult to abstract from this context.

Furthermore, Kant is definitive in his insistence that *no object* can itself be called sublime, and neither can the form of any object give rise to the sublime in the mind, as the sublime is, in his definition, expressly not sensible (§23, 245–246). For Kant, the (in this example, mathematical) sublimity of an object can only be spoken about as the *effect* of satisfaction as the result of a complex differential between pleasure and displeasure in the variable abilities of our faculties and their limitations when faced with a great magnitude. The object is not sublime, nor is our sensible reaction to it, but rather, the object is “taken up as sublime” with a pleasure in the superiority of our faculty of reason to that of the imagination

(§27, 260). This reliance on concepts specific to the Kantian edifice, in conjunction with the fact that the sublime “satisfaction” is tied to concepts of reason and imagination *resulting* from interactions with great magnitudes rather than the magnitudes themselves places his idea of the sublime at a remove from most other accounts, and as such creates a great difficulty for those attempting to integrate any art-critical concept of the sublime into the Kantian one. It is in this context that the question of establishing comparative units of measure arises, as the concept of a “great magnitude”, or even, paradoxically, that of a magnitude “beyond compare”, is predicated on an account of how we take up units of measurement with which to make judgments of measure. This account, along with many other aspects of Kant’s description of the sublime, is an integrated part of his philosophical account of judgment, and not easily taken out of this context.

The problem with the second possibility, that of reading these modernist works in a Kantian context but rejecting Kant’s exclusion of artistic objects from the category the sublime, is related to the first in that it would involve a repurposing of complex Kantian doctrine. It has, however, been attempted many times, by commentators and philosophers from various traditions, all attempting to apply the Kantian sublime more or less faithfully to artistic judgment.⁹ The problem with adopting this approach is that it is difficult, in the last analysis, not to side with those commentator for whom Kant’s dismissal of artistic sublimity is not only textually evident, but philosophically justified *in the context of the Critiques*. An article by Uygur Abaci summarizes and expands this position admirably, and I will rely on his reading in order to elucidate the exact nature of the Kantian rejection of art objects as capable of evoking the feeling of the sublime (“Kant’s Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity”).

The particular *via media* I have chosen involves using the application of the Kantian

⁹ Cf. Lyotard, Derrida, Kirwan, Pillow, Shaw, etc.

mathematical sublime to artistic works as a *model* for critical exploration. I am using the word “model” here in a few senses. Each of these works is in some ways exemplary of late-modernist concerns, so my analysis is a model in the sense of synecdoche, as any critical appraisal of a specific work whose conclusions are extrapolated to an era or movement. I also intend the word “model” to refer to an almost antithetical methodology in which a philosophical concept is deployed in the context of a particular work of art. Rather than be merely “applied” to this work of art, it is chosen because of architectonic resonances and is therefore transformed by the logic of the piece to which it is applied. This type of use supposes an almost hermetic theoretical space in which it is possible for the theoretical terms, in this case those surrounding the Kantian mathematical sublime, to operate in an internally consistent manner, but one dictated by the structure of the work to which they are applied, not the philosophical structure from which they have been taken. This is a model in the sense that it is a space in which genuine “results” are generated, certain truths about a work are produced, and perhaps reciprocally some novel aspects of the philosophical concept are exposed, but these truths need only be consistent *within the model*. It would remain a possibility for another model to be constructed, with slightly different axioms or elements, generating differing or even contradictory truths about the work or even the borrowed concept. This does not, however, imply that the analysis is unidirectional, as both the work of art and the philosophical concept are in some ways being taken “out of context” and into the context of each other. This exposure should reveal previously invisible particularities of the features of each. My explorations of *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible I & II*, and *Gruppen*, in conjunction with the concept of the Kantian mathematical sublime, are meant to serve as a critical model in this sense: my use of the Kantian sublime is internally consistent, but explicitly non-Kantian in the sense that it does not align with place and meaning of the sublime within the

logic of the critiques. Its logic is dictated by its relation to the works I have chosen to investigate, and certain features of Kant's theory become more or less salient in terms of their correspondences to the works at hand, just as certain features of the artworks become more or less salient due to their exposure to the Kantian concept.

Keeping both senses of the word "model" in mind, the synecdochic and the hermetic, we will proceed to examine the Kantian sublime and the various applications suitable to its conceptual framework. This chapter will consist of a paraphrasing of the Kantian mathematical sublime, followed by a lexicon of the key concepts developed therein and a short conclusion. Passages from *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment* are all taken from the 2000 Guyer and Matthews translation and references will be given in the form of paragraph number followed by German pagination.

The Kantian Sublime: A Paraphrase

The Sublime and the Beautiful

Both the sublime and the beautiful are **pure**, **disinterested**, and **singular** judgments in the category of **subjective universals** (§23, 244). They are **pure** in that they are not mixed up with anything teleological (§26, 254). They are **disinterested** in that they are not dependent on concepts or on the material existence of the object. They are **singular** in that they refer to specific objects, not general categories of objects. Despite this **singularity**, both judgments are **subjective** due to their independence from determinate concepts as well as **universal**, as we represent them to ourselves and others as universally valid. Judgments of sublimity or beauty are similar to judgments of the sensibly pleasing in that they arise from this **subjective** position. The former differ through their **disinterestedness** and **purity**, in addition to their modality of

representable judgment. These qualities allow them to be **universal** judgments, if only of particular **singular** objects (§23, 245).

We can therefore encounter a specific object, not necessarily a material one, and judge it as beautiful or sublime without appealing to a determinate concept (as we would with a judgment of goodness) or a sensation (as we would with a judgment of pleasantness), but merely through reflection on our own perception of the object. Despite the subjective nature of this judgment, we can represent it *as* beautiful or sublime, appealing to the *sensus communis* based on an understanding of a shared accord between *a priori* faculties, in the case of the beautiful, the **imagination**, and **understanding**, and in the case of the sublime, the **imagination** and **reason**. (§23, 244).

The judgment of the beautiful also differs from that of the sublime in that the first is concerned with **form** and the second with **unboundedness**. A judgment of beauty therefore depends on **limitation**, as this is what constitutes form for us, while the sublime depends on **limitlessness**, either represented in the object which evokes the sublime, or an instance of this object (§23, 244). The beautiful is, then, dependent on the (**reflective**) presentation of a concept of **understanding** in relation to the **limited form** of the object (or instance of an object), while the sublime is dependent on the presentation (also **reflective**) of a concept of **reason** in relation to a **limitless formless** object (or an instance of such). Both judgments bring about satisfaction, but the satisfaction derived from a judgment of beauty is oriented around the **quality** of an object, whereas that derived from a judgment of the sublime is oriented around its **quantity** (§24, 247). This satisfaction at the **quality** of an object, dependent as it is on the free play of the imagination and the understanding, brings with it a sense of calm contemplation, satisfaction at the **quantity** of an object, dependent on a movement of the mind, a movement related through

the imagination to either the faculty of **desire** or that of **cognition**. The first brings with it the sense of the dynamically sublime, the second the mathematically sublime.

The Nominally Sublime

The *nominal* definitions of the sublime are as follows: “**that which is absolutely great,**” “**that in comparison with which everything else is small,**” and “**that which to even be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of mind which surpasses every measure of the senses**” (§25, 248-250). The first nomination and its consequent, the second, entail a necessary distinction between what it means **to be great** (Groß-sein) and what it means to **be a magnitude** (eine Größe sein). This distinction is integral to the mathematical sublime and is predicated on the fact that to determine something is a **magnitude** is to determine that it is a continuous homogenous unity, but to determine its **greatness** one must have another **magnitude** with which to compare it. For something to be **absolutely great** it must be incomparably large, its **magnitude** deriving from some quality immanent to it. This is not a judgment made through comparison, but a judgment of **reflection** regarding its representation in our cognition (§25, 248-250). This **reflective** judgment differs from a **determinative** one in that the former seeks a universal for a known particular, and the latter the inverse. Our judgment, then, is **reflective** on the representation of the object in our **imagination** or **reason**, (the universals) not on the object itself (the particular). In perceiving an object that is **absolutely great**, our **imagination** strives towards the infinite while our **reason** claims the object in its totality. The inadequacy of our sensible representation of the object, manifest in the fact that it is beyond compare, in comparison with our supersensible ability to grasp the object and judge it, is what awakens the feeling of the sublime. The sublime itself lies not in the object, but in the resulting state of mind the object evokes. We can then call the

sublime that “**which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses**” (§25, 250).

The Mathematical Sublime

The feeling of the mathematical sublime is intimated to us through an experience with the **infinite** as presented in nature, and specifically through the differential between the displeasure felt at our sensible inadequacy in its face, and pleasure at our supersensible ability to grasp it in its totality. We can grasp the concept of the infinite in its totality through **mathematical estimation** (as is evidenced through our ability to intuit results involving transfinite ordinals), but not in **aesthetic estimation**, as this requires the faculty of the **imagination** to take up a magnitude for comparison, a possibility reliant on its attendant actions of **apprehension** and **comprehension**. **Apprehension** is limitless reception of the manifold and can theoretically *go on* to infinity, but not without losing the initial impressions as it moves forward; our **comprehension** is limited, relies on synthesis, and is necessary for attaching a numerical or comparative sense to apprehension of size or magnitude, which cannot take hold in the face of the infinite as it moves through our apprehending consciousness. Our **imagination**, then, fails in the face of the **absolutely great** and its intimations of the infinite (§26, 252-253). To think the infinite is to think something without compare, and to think this as a whole requires a “faculty of mind which surpasses every standard of sense” (§26, 254), and it is the awakening of this faculty and the pleasure we take in its superiority over sense which engenders the feeling of the sublime. The sublime, then, is to be found in those appearances of nature which bring about an intimation of the infinite. We attempt to **comprehend** this intimation as it moves through our **apprehending** consciousness, leading us to perceive the inadequacy of our imagination to the

task of taking in the infinity of nature as a whole. At the same time, this very inadequacy awakens in us a faculty of reason which can conceive of infinity, and nature, as a whole. It is this feeling of superiority and the ascension of **reason** over the **imagination**, of the supersensible over the sensible, which evokes the sublime.

We cannot, however, merely call the ascension of **reason** over the **imagination** sublime. The sublime is evoked through the **differential** between, on the one hand, the inadequacy of the aesthetic estimation of **magnitude** and its attendant **quantity** in the face of the **absolutely great** infinite, and on the other hand, the ascension and superiority of the supersensible faculty of **reason** and its ability to grasp this infinite as a totality. This **differential** is experienced as a displeasure surmounted by a pleasure:

The **quality** of the feeling of the sublime is that it is a feeling of displeasure concerning the aesthetic faculty of judging an object that is yet at the same time represented as purposive, which is possible because the subject's own incapacity reveals the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the very same subject, and the mind can aesthetically judge the latter only through the former (§27, 259).

Unlike the judging of the beautiful, which demonstrated a relation between the faculties of **imagination** and **understanding** characterized by unison, the judgment of the sublime is based on a relation between the faculties of **imagination** and **reason** characterized by conflict (§27, 258). This conflict manifests in the quality of the feeling of the sublime and its origin in the tension between not only **imagination** and **reason** (in the pleasure at one's ascension over the other), but **comprehension** and **apprehension**, (in the ability of only one to go on to infinity), **quantum** and **magnitude** (the necessity of the first as a measure for the second and the failure of this operation in the face of the infinite), the tension between the **calm** contemplation of the beautiful and the **movement** associated with the judgment of the sublime, and finally that tension which embodies the experience and feeling of the sublime: "the pleasure that is only possible by

means of a displeasure” (§28, 260).

Conceptual Lexicon

Art, Applicability to the Sublime of

The debate around the applicability of the Kantian sublime to art basically divides itself into several different camps. There are those who argue that the “formless” predicate (see entry below), clearly in opposition to the judgment of form appropriate to the beautiful, excludes the work of art from judgments of sublimity. Derrida exemplifies this position in his essay on the

Parergon:

The mastery of the human artist [...] operates with a view to an end, determining, defining, giving form. In deciding on contours, giving boundaries to the form and the cise [a Derridean neologism], this mastery measures and dominates. Both the sublime, if there is any sublime, exists only by overflowing: it exceeds cise and good measure, it is no longer proportioned according to man and his determinations. There is thus no good example, no “suitable” example of the sublime in the products of human art. (122)

Opposed to this view we can find, for example, Kirk Pillow’s position, which emphasizes the fact that, while Kant states that the sublime can be evoked by formless objects, its evocation is not restricted to these objects; in fact, a relatively “small” and formally complex work could just as easily evoke the sublime (*Sublime Understanding* 68–77). While Pillow’s assertion that the predicate “formless” is not strictly necessary for the evocation of the sublime has more textual support (§23, 244), his general case regarding the applicability of the Kantian sublime to products of human intention is on shakier ground, as most close readings of the third *Critique* tend towards a rejection of the possibility of an artistic sublime.

Uygar Abaci's 2008 article "Kant's Justified Dismissal of the Artistic Sublimity" is the clearest formulation of these objections. Abaci essentially concurs with commentators such as Pillow who focus on the fact that Kant only says the sublime can *also* be ascribed to formless objects, not *only*. He also, however, goes on to point out how focusing on this can risk missing the point that "Kant could not literally mean spatiotemporally unlimited formless objects here. Any object, no matter how vast it is, has definite boundaries in space-time; it is the very condition for it to be one *Gegenstand* [object]" (238). Abaci goes on to point out how for Kant, as the sublime is found not in an object itself but our capacity to think the limitlessness that the object suggests, "formlessness is in fact the indirect effect or impression of the object on the mind of the subject" (238). Although this could lead to the impression that works of art or objects of nature could evoke the sublime, Abaci goes on to argue that the *context* of these objects, and specifically the context of nature, is what "gives the sublime its distinctive character" (239). This distinctive character is derived from our discovery of the superiority and *autonomy* of our supersensible faculties (in the case of the mathematical sublime, reason) not only over our sensible nature as such, but over nature in general. So this elevation of cognition over the sensible must be understood in the context of the sensible *as it relates to our own autonomy from nature*. This autonomy is important in a structural sense as it highlights the critical contrast Kant develops between nature and freedom and *noumena* and *phenomena*, but also because it is in the context of nature as that which we feel superiority over that an object can evoke the sublime and make us aware of our freedom of cognition in the face of sensible nature. As Abaci writes, "any theory of artistic sublimity must also convince us that a work of art can do all this in the way a natural object can" (241). While a writer like Pillow might argue for the ability of a complex work of art to evoke the mathematical sublime in terms of elevating our powers of reason over

the merely sensible, it is harder to argue this case in the context of our autonomy in the context of nature. (See the entry under “Faculties, The” below for more on this)

A related way that the sublime has historically been applied to art, however, is in the sense of a culturally recognizable *depiction* of the sublime. Abaci describes this process as part of a logically determining judgment:

[A]n object is subsumed under the determinate concept of sublimity. Someone who has enough familiarity with the genre does not need to engage himself or herself to the aesthetic experience of a particular Caspar David Friedrich painting in order to judge it to be “sublime.” (247)

These sorts of judgments are interesting in that they suggest the sublime can be evoked through depictions of sublimity in nature, and that the sublime is more or less a product of taste. This in turn suggests what James Kirwan refers to as “sublime properties,” or aspects of works with which we associate the *idea* of the sublime. He writes that

[I]f one is at all familiar with the meaning of the word “sublime,” it is possible to recognize the intention to inspire it—as for example with Milton, the Gothic novel, the painting of George [John] Martin [sic] or Caspar David Friedrich, the music of Wagner, the *Rambo* series, the Alps (in their role as scenery), and so on—even without any satisfaction necessarily accompanying this recognition. There are, then, *sublime properties* which I may or may not have a feeling for, or, as we would say with dependent beauty, which I may or may not have a taste for. (*The Aesthetic in Kant*, 71)

This is about as far from Abaci’s reading of Kant’s concept of the sublime as we can get. Rather than an experience of our superiority and autonomy over nature, the sublime is reduced to an imitable genre, a mere logical predicate to a judgment of taste regarding a work. Although I am applying the concept of the mathematical sublime to works of art, I would like to avoid the thesis that they belong to the genre of sublimity. Abaci’s analysis seems to me the strongest in that it is the reading of Kant’s concept most sensitive to its place the three critiques, but I do not believe it precludes the use of the mathematical sublime as a heuristic concept. Rather, it merely enjoins

one to keep the concept as intact as possible although, by necessity, outside the strict realm of the Kantian critiques.

Faculties, The

The concept of faculties does not play a major role in my model of criticism, but its centrality in the Kantian critical project demands at least a cursory definition. As Gilles Deleuze explains in his *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, there are two distinct sense of the word “faculty” (*Vermögen* or *facultas*). The first sense is that of a representation relating an object to a subject. Deleuze defines the *faculty of knowledge* as concerned with a representation related to the object “from the standpoint of its agreement or conformity to it” (3). The *faculty of desire* is defined as a representation which “enters into a causal relationship with its object,” and finally, the *faculty of pleasure and pain* is defined as a relationship wherein an object “affects the subject by intensifying or weakening its vital force” (3). In this schema, the three Critiques have, as a central concern, the question of whether or not each of these faculties is capable of a higher form. Deleuze explains that

We may say that a faculty has a higher form when it finds *in itself* the law of its own exercise [...]. In its higher form, a faculty is thus autonomous. The *Critique of Pure Reason* begins by asking: “Is there a higher faculty of knowledge?”, the *Critique of Practical Reason*: “Is there a higher faculty of desire?”, and the *Critique of Judgment*: “Is there a higher form of pleasure and pain?” (4)

The higher forms of these faculties, their institutions of autonomy, are then established as *legislative* in that they dictate the mode of representation of the objects corresponding to it. This brings us to what Deleuze defines as the second sense of the word “faculty”: those sources of representation through which the higher faculties legislate over their corresponding objects. These faculties include our *sensibility*, *understanding*, and *reason* (8). These faculties can be

thought of as those *means* through which a faculty (in the first sense) legislates over the objects that are subject to it. Each of these faculties (in the second sense) have a mode of representation proper to it: intuition for sensibility, concepts for understanding, and ideas for reason. Through a *synthesis* between the presented (not represented) thing (say, an object of intuition) and the mode of representation proper to it (say, intuition), it appears for us under the faculty of, in this example, our sensibility. As Deleuze explains, the three *Critiques* are invested not only in explicating “the higher forms of the faculties in the first sense of the word (knowledge, desire, pleasure and pain),” but showing how to each of these higher faculties “there must correspond a certain relationship between the faculties in the second sense of the word (imagination, understanding, reason)” (10).

With this schema in mind, we can understand the centrality of the discordant relationship between reason and the imagination in the mathematical sublime: it is the encounter through which the faculty of pleasure and pain is made autonomous (finds its higher form through an immanent encounter), and, as autonomous legislating faculty, orders its relationships to the faculties in the second sense of the word (shows how reason is elevated over the imagination through an understanding of the infinite). In this way the mathematical sublime is intimately tied to the doctrine of the faculties.

Form and Formlessness

There is a strong link in Kant between the concepts of formlessness, unboundedness, and the sublime in that the infinite as presented by nature is often presented in an object which we perceive as being without bounds or boundary, and is therefore somewhat “formless.” This formlessness should always be understood in opposition to judgments of the beautiful, which are

entirely concerned with the form of the judged object. There has been much debate around the importance or centrality of “formlessness” for the evocation of the sublime, debate which can be divided into two camps: a traditionalist Kantian response which differentiates between formlessness and unboundedness and focusing on the particular examples Kant provides of the first, and a post-structural response, mainly typified by Jacques Derrida and Jean Lyotard, whose respective treatments of the sublime are accused by the traditionalists of overemphasizing the “formless” or ineffable nature of the sublime, and, in Lyotard, its attendant evocation by artworks attempting to present the unrepresentable.¹⁰ The more strictly Kantian perspective is well represented by Crowther, who explains:

What Kant has in mind by the term “formless” can be illustrated as follows. If we view a mountain in the distance it has a characteristic shape which enables us to describe it as “a mountain.” But suppose that we are standing at its base with, perhaps, its higher reaches shrouded in mist. Under these conditions we lack the vantage-point which would dispose us simply to describe it as “a mountain.” Rather, our perceptual faculties cannot take in the sheer immensity of the peak. They are swamped. The mountain seems, in our close and immediate perceptual encounter with it, to be a limitless phenomenal mass or aggregate, without any overall defining shape or form. Again, suppose the peak is one of a series. Here, while the individual “mountains” may (from a distance) be characterizable as such without difficulty, it may be that our attention is engrossed by the perceptual rhythm of the series—its seeming to flow beyond the horizon towards infinity. In these two examples we see how an object can appear to be formless by overwhelming our perceptual faculties and suggesting the idea of limitlessness or infinity to us. (*The Kantian Sublime*, 79–80)

This clarification is important as it reminds us of the essentially *perceptual* nature of the sublime, in that it is to be found in our *response* to nature, never in nature itself; but Crowther is also showing how an object with a determinate form (a mountain range) can *point* towards infinity. His description is especially significant as it evokes a concept of rhythm and repetition as potentially pointing towards the infinite, as well as clearly demonstrating how finite objects can

¹⁰ For a particularly egregious misreading of the “postmodern” position, see James Kirwan’s *Sublimity*, in which the author manages to devote much of a chapter (141-158) to Lyotard’s supposed position on the sublime without once quoting the full book Lyotard wrote on the subject.

suggest the infinite. The idea of our perceptual faculties being “overwhelmed” and therefore suggesting the limitless needs, of course, to be paired with the second motion of the faculties associated with the sublime—namely, the ascension of reason and the discordant relationship between the faculties that this relation between being overwhelmed and still grasping through reason engenders.

While Crowther maintains Kant’s focus on nature’s ability to evoke this sense of formlessness, Kirk Pillow (one of those to whom Abaci’s criticism is directed) argues that this type of differential evoked in relation to the formless and limitless is possible through art. Importantly, Pillow focuses on the term *unbounded* rather than formless, as this term is much easier to relate to artistic works than the latter. Responding to the beginning of Kant’s analytic of the sublime (§23, 244), and the differences between the sublime and the beautiful with regards to form, he writes:

Though Kant refers there to the beautiful and the sublime in nature, the same bound/unbound distinction applies to the work of art as well. The form of an object or work sets its spatial and/or temporal boundaries, so the question will be what aspect of the thing can open the *unboundedness* of sublimity. It will be important to keep in mind that many of Kant’s readers have failed to notice, but which Rudolf Makkreel has observed, namely that “Kant does not write that the sublime can be found *only* in a formless object, but that it can *also* be found there.... Thus what is judged to be sublime is not necessarily formless.” The experience of the sublime must arise from a presentation of unboundedness, but nothing in Kant’s account implies that an object with formal limits cannot give rise to this experience by means of some qualities it possesses other than its formal structure. Among those who have missed this point is Jacques Derrida, who has argued that “the sublime is to be found, for its part, in an ‘object without form’ and the ‘without-limit’ is ‘represented’ in it or on the occasion of it, and yet gives the totality of the without-limit to be thought.” His reference to an “object without form” obscures the passage from Kant quoted above, where Kant states that the sublime can *also* be found in formless objects, not that it must be found in them alone. (68–69)

Pillow goes on to suggest several works of art with the potential to evoke the sublime, notably Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. This has particular relevance here, as he is one of the few

commentators who suggests a literary text as potentially evoking the sublime. The crux of Pillow's argument is that the admirers of the work "*feel the sublime* when they seek failingly to encompass all that it induces them to think" (68). To "seek failingly" is an excellent summary of the possibility of evocation of the sublime through art, coming, as it must, through a differential between the *failure* to grasp something which would impart the necessary feeling of being overwhelmed, combined with reason's grasping of the work as some sort of unified whole. The comparison between Pillow's suggested text and mine, however, brings up some difficulties in the application of the Kantian sublime to art.

Pale Fire, is, too be sure, a fairly complex work. It is a hybrid or chimerical combination between poem and novel, the poem being a production of one of the novel's characters, and the more novelistic section of the book being a commentary on the poem by another character. Between these two fictional fictions a novel somehow emerges, pieced together through the reader's ability to see meaning in the poet's lines and the commentator's lies and find some sort of narrative truth between them. It is not, however, *Finnegans Wake*. It is written in English, has a fairly straightforward plot (although gleaning this in its entirety might take a second reading), and, as a whole, is a fairly readable text in all of the ways the *Wake* is not. To establish that *Finnegans Wake* is sublime and *Pale Fire* is not, however, would necessarily involve some questionable lines of reasoning. The obvious grounds for such an argument would be that *Finnegans Wake* is *sui generis* and different in kind, and not degree, from other "complex" books. This is a fairly accepted opinion about the book and is in many ways self-evident, but demonstrating it in the context of as rigorously constructed a concept as the Kantian sublime would bring up some serious difficulties. How, for example, are not all texts, in the last analysis, capable of evoking the sublime through their essential resistance to total understanding? This is

more or less reasoning by way of *reduction ad absurdum* in that there is clearly no concrete way to demonstrate the absolute uniqueness of *Finnegans Wake* in terms of interpretability and no way to *not* eventually reduce any such argument to the problem of interpretation in general and the aneconomic principle of language.

My solution to this, the concept of a “model,” works because it creates a space in which one can say “this work could evoke the sublime” without being forced to elucidate an entire extra-Kantian theory of sublimity or become trapped by dubious attempts to “better” Kant’s description of the sublime and its provenance. Pillow uses *Pale Fire* as an example of a work that could evoke sublimity in a reader, but his focus on its obscurity of meaning leads one inexorably to the conclusion that any work could be considered sublime in the case of the context, the reader, or the work itself exhibiting a lack of illumination. In contrast, I merely suggest that the conceptual apparatus of the mathematical sublime can serve as a useful heuristic for certain complex late-modernist works: their formal complexity and the density of the internal relations of their aspects can be illuminated by the complex network of related concepts that make up Kant’s exposition of the mathematical sublime. It is in this respect that Pillow’s account of *Pale Fire* is important, as it leads him to clarify that it is “conceivable, and compatible with Kant’s account that judgment of sublimity can apply to even a small work of art, when reflection on the *complex* of its parts overwhelms imagination’s efforts to comprehend the purposive unity of the whole” (75). This reading can be compared to Crowther’s account of *unified* manifolds as we grasp them in intuition under the **magnitude** entry, giving us two related accounts of how complexities are capable of evoking the sublime.

Infinite, The

Kant's treatment of the infinite in the *Critiques* is sharply divided to the point of apparent contradiction, but, like many such apparent contradictions, it resolves itself with a closer examination of the relevant terms. The apparent contradiction emerges when comparing the treatment of the infinite in the Antimony vs. the Aesthetic in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. As Carl Posy explains:

In his solution to the First Antinomy, he denies that we can grasp the spatial universe as infinite, and therefore that this universe can be infinite; while in the Aesthetic he says just the opposite: "Space is represented as a given infinite magnitude" (A25/B39). And he rests these upon consistently opposite grounds. In the Antinomy we are told that we can have no intuitive grasp of an infinite space, and in the Aesthetic he says that our grasp of infinite space is precisely intuitive. ("Intuition and Infinity" 165)

Posy resolves this apparent contradiction through an explanation of the differences between the Antimonies and the Aesthetic, but, more importantly, through an explanation of how Kant's *mathematical* concept of infinity differs from his *empirical* one. Posy's article, which goes into far more depth than is appropriate here, is excellent partly because it relies on the strange fact that this Kantian differentiation is best explained with modern, post-Kantian mathematics. Posy's focus is in the extent to which we are able to grasp mathematical or empirical infinity through *intuition*, and he frames his article around the famous debates between Brouwer and Hilbert on the necessity for human intuition in the construction of mathematical objects. His main point is that *both* Brouwer and Hilbert's positions are Kantian, they merely espouse, respectively, empirical and mathematical conceptions of the Kantian infinite. Posy is not, of course, suggesting that Brouwer or Hilbert were influenced by Kant, merely that, in his words, "the question [of the infinite] and its potential answers have internal structures that remain stable across the generations" (193). Posy's thesis suggests the possibility of explaining the two Kantian concepts of the sublime in slightly anachronistic terms. Although set-theoretic

vocabulary post-dates Kant, it is the best available vocabulary for describing a completed infinity and is therefore perfect for illustrating his concept.

We can think of the difference between Kant's notions of empirical and mathematical infinity in terms of different ways to conceptualize the infinity of the natural numbers (or counting numbers), which we will call \mathbb{N} . For the former we would conceptualize them in terms of an *infinite series* and for the latter in terms of an *infinite set*. A demonstration of the infinity of \mathbb{N} in "empirical" form would show that for any number x belonging to \mathbb{N} it is always possible to find a y where $y > x$. Constructed this way, infinity is generally represented by the ∞ symbol. Opposed to this we could construct a "mathematical" conceptualization of the infinity of the natural numbers we would think of \mathbb{N} in terms of a *collection* of every possible natural number. We could then talk about the infinity of \mathbb{N} in terms of its size. Infinity conceptualized this way is generally represented by the \aleph symbol. When we differentiate between ∞ and \aleph we are differentiating between infinity conceived of as a repeating series and infinity conceived of as the size of a totality. With this distinction in mind we can turn to an explanation of Crowther's, who writes that:

In the first *Critique*, [Kant] argues that the idea of infinity-as-a-whole is only coherent if we suppose the existence of a supersensible substrate to nature. Hence, by emphasizing the role of infinity in his theory of the sublime Kant is not only relating his work to an established tradition but is doing so by means of a concept which points directly to one of the central notions in his overall philosophical position (i.e. the noumenal realm). (106)

While Kant is not literally referring to a post-Cantorian notion of a completed infinity, we can still think of the difference between empirically experienced infinity in terms of an infinite series and mathematical infinity in terms of a completed set. This also provides a useful link to Hegel's concept of good and bad infinities mentioned in the introduction. If we transpose Kant's

“empirical infinite” onto the “bad infinity” and the “mathematical infinite” onto the “good infinite” we can understand how the two relate in intuition: only in contemplating infinity understood as a series can we hope to understand completed infinity or infinity as a whole. A good mathematical application of this would be to understand a “bound” infinity such as the infinity of real numbers between 0 and 1 on the number line, and from this try to understand how one could speak of a “completed” infinity as a set. A good art-critical application of this would be to understand how a clearly “bounded” but overwhelmingly complex piece of art could suggest the infinite through its complexity and the surpassing of our sensibility.

Magnitudes

The concept of magnitude is important for an understanding of the Kantian sublime for a number of reasons, including the fact that its usage constitutes one of the key divisions between the mathematical and dynamical sublime. Recalling Pillow’s opinion in the **Form and Formlessness** entry that a judgement of sublimity is conceivable in light of a “reflection on the *complex* of [an artwork’s] parts overwhelms imagination’s efforts to comprehend the purposive unity of the whole” (75), we can consider to what extent this “complex” would constitute a magnitude. It is important to understand that in Kant, as Daniel Sutherland explains, “[a]ny reference to magnitudes is a reference to a homogeneous manifold in intuition, and [...] in Kant’s view a homogeneous manifold consists of qualitatively identical elements” (“Arithmetic from Kant to Frege”, 142). It’s important to read “manifold” here in a mathematical sense, in that a manifold, while homogenous in intuition, can be a structural object, even one with architectonic features. Part of the possibility of speaking of complex works of art in terms of the sublime is the *possibility* of their existing as a holistic whole presented manifold in intuition. We can *think* the

concept of a work *as a whole*, and even if that work (say, a piece of music) presents itself in terms of its holistic structure, we can still differentiate this presentation from the presentation of a piece of music in terms of its individuated parts. How we undertake the synthesis necessary of these disparate parts functions very differently in the cases of the mathematical and dynamical sublimities, as Paul Crowther explains:

It is clear that the extensive and intensive qualities of a whole which are involved in mathematical synthesis are the basis of the magnitude of phenomenon (i.e. the proportion of space and time they occupy relative to other phenomena). The dynamical synthesis on the other hand pertains to the physical powers and cohesion of phenomena. How, then, can this distinction be of relevance to the sublime? The answer is that, while, as Kant makes clear in §23 and elsewhere, the formlessness of phenomena can overwhelm perception and thus give rise to a rational idea, a similar idea can also be occasioned in us when a great phenomenon threatens through its physical powers to overwhelm and completely destroy us. This means that a distinction between the mathematical and dynamic sublime is called for not because the sublime involves a mental movement, but because there are two different ways in which this movement can be set in motion. (85–86)

While Crowther would likely not agree with the aspect of Pillow's reading whereby small objects can appear mathematically sublime, his distinction makes clear that the judgement of the mathematical sublime is differentiated from the dynamical through the type of magnitude with which its movement is set into motion. This still leaves the question of what types of complex forms could present themselves as "great" magnitudes capable of evoking the sublime, and whether the properties of quantity needed for evocation of the sublime need be intensive or extensive, and what sort of judgement is needed for these magnitudes to evoke the sublime. Here is one of the places that the third *Critique* varies from the first, as Catharine Elizabeth Diehl makes clear in her dissertation *The Theory of Intensive Magnitudes in Leibniz and Kant*

Since appearances all contain a multitude within a unity, this implies that all empirical objects satisfy the definition of a *quantum*. But, in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, Kant goes further. He argues from the claim that we intuit everything as a unity possessing a particular extensive and intensive magnitude to the

conclusion that all appearances can be aesthetically judged as “groß” or “klein.” Kant thus cites the thesis from the first *Critique* as a justification for his new contention that everything can be *aesthetically* judged—and, more strongly, that all mathematical judgments of quantity depend upon aesthetic judgments (266)

Diehls’ exploration of magnitudes in Kant and Leibniz is more complex than can be addressed here, but this point is an important one to keep in mind in terms of the subjective nature of our judgements of “great” and “small”. She highlights the importance of this in terms of magnitude’s relationship to the finitude of judgement, writing that “The estimation of magnitudes in mere intuition is “aesthetic” in both senses: the limits of our intuitive capacities as finite beings determine what functions as a unity for a reflective judgment of things as “groß” or “klein” (265-266). This reading provides more insight into the ways in which a finite object could evoke a sense of the infinite, as it shows how *any* object which forms a unified magnitude in reflective judgement (as great or small) is functioning *as finite*. Our understanding of the infinite as a concept is bequeathed through the limits of the finite in apprehension. The application of the concept of the mathematical sublime to a work of art necessarily involves conceiving of the apprehension of the work as a magnitude in two ways: the subject must be able to grasp the artwork as an intensive magnitude in intuition, one presenting itself as a unified manifold, even if this manifold is “formless” due to its *subjective* immensity or complexity. This unified magnitude cannot preclude the possibility of the subject being able to grasp aspects or moments within the work as individuated magnitudes as well. It is, in fact, the second fact upon which the *reflective* judgement of immensity is based. Without a unit of comparison (either immanent or external to the work) the judgement of immensity could not be made, and the object could not intimate its glimpse of the infinite in understanding. The evocation of the sublime, and the concept of intensive magnitudes and their subjective apprehension and the subsequent reflective judgement is, then intrinsic to the Kantian sublime, but also to the *use* of this concept in an art-

critical framework.

Small versus the Large, The

One potential problem with Kant's concept of the sublime, in terms of its applicability to complex works of art or even complex and "great" productions of nature is his insistence on the priority of the very large over the very small. If the essence of sublimity is related to its ability to engender a sense of the infinite, it should follow that his would work in the direction of the very small or the very large, as both suggest the endlessness of a continuum, and, while not literally infinite or formless, can bring our minds to the point where we understand the concept. In other words, the infinitesimal should be equivalent to the infinite in terms of being able to engender an understanding of the formlessness of the infinite and therefore evocative of the sublime. On the contrary, as Crowther explains,

Kant dismisses [the notion of the infinitely tiny] summarily and suggests that we couple "a kind of contempt with what we call infinitely small" (CJ \$25). The questions which this raises are those of why Kant's dismissal is so summary, and whether it is justified. In this respect it might be claimed that we can surely take some phenomenal object and imagine it being divided into smaller and smaller units in the direction of infinity. Does not William Blake talk of seeing "infinity in a grain of sand"? (106).

Crowther goes on to imagine that Kant's objection is based on our inability to imagine the particularities of very small particles, such as the atom, in contrast with our ability to simply regard the stars in order to grasp the very large. Crowther rejects this line of reasoning, however, arguing that:

While we do not have sensible intuitions of the sub-microscopic sphere, we can still creatively imagine such intuitions in terms of analogies, images, and metaphors taken from the realm of macroscopic space and its contents. [...] Imagination could be overwhelmed in even trying to comprehend the possible appearances of the micro-world, and art can be particularly efficacious in stimulating us in this direction. (107)

The famous Eames brothers film *Powers of Ten: A Film Dealing with the Relative Size of Things in the Universe and the Effect of Adding Another Zero* (1972), which starts with a couple of people in a park before zooming out to a perspective of 10^{24} meters (the observable universe), and then back down to a view of 10^{-16} meters (a subatomic quark), is a perfect illustration of this point, showing how a sense of the continuum, and of the infinite, can be engendered in either “direction”—the outward or the inward. What is, in fact, most salient in both the film and Crowther’s apparent correction to Kant’s point is that there seem to be two very different ways in which the infinite can be suggested: the “bad infinite,” which is repetitive and based on a *comparison* between a pre-established magnitude and a larger one (the Eames film begins with human-size, of course); and the “good infinite,” where a presented magnitude is *incomparably* large. This would seem to negate Crowther’s point, as he is clearly focusing on art’s ability to suggest the sublime in terms of a comparative establishment of the infinite, not an absolute one. An absolute grasp of the infinite should somehow obtain without the necessity of comparative values, then, which would negate much, if not all, of the application of the sublime to art or even to nature. This problematic, and its potential resolution, is best expressed by Jacques Derrida in his essay in the *Parergon*. As this is a fairly central problem, I will quote him at length.

[W]hy call magnitude or “absolutely large” that which is no longer a quantity? [...] Why would the absolute excess of dimension, or rather of quantity, be schematized on the side of largeness and not of smallness? Why this valorization of the large which thus still intervenes in a comparison between incomparables? To be sure, the absolutely large is not compared with anything, not with any phenomenal dimension in any case, but it is still *preferred* to the absolutely small. In short, why is the sublime large and not small? [...] Kant does not ask himself why this should go without saying, naturally toward the largest and the highest. The question is all the more inevitable because the nonphenomenal infinity of the idea must always be presented in intuition. Now everything that is “presented” in intuition and therefore “represented” aesthetically, every phenomenon is also a *quantum*. But what decides that, in this *quantum*, the more is worth more than the less, and the large more or better than the small? The agency of decision or

“preference” can as such be neither phenomenal nor noumenal, neither sensible nor intelligible. [...] Kant has introduced comparison where he says it should have no place. He introduces it, he lets it introduce itself in an apparently very subtle manner. Not by re-implicating magnitude in the comparable, but by comparing the comparable with the incomparable. The logic of the argument, it seems to me, and perhaps the thing itself, are not without relation to the proof of the existence of God according to Saint Anselm (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitare potest*). (136–137)

The most pertinent issue here is the question of how something can be both “large” and “without compare.” Clearly, despite repeatedly stating that the sublime is evoked by something that is large “beyond compare,” there must be some pre-established unit of measurement with which this assessment of “large” is made, not to mention a more generalized schema in which the idea of “beyond compare” can be established within an explicitly comparative system. As we have established repeatedly above, the entire framework of the mathematically sublime is based on a series of differentials, but at the centre seems to rest on a concept that is “without compare.” One response to this quandary is presented both by Derrida and *Powers of Ten*: there is a standard of measure with which the “absolutely large” is determined, and that standard of measure is the human body—the image that begins the zooms of the film, and which necessarily delimits the imagination insofar as it is the standard of measure predicating the attempted apprehension and comprehension of something that overwhelms through size. Derrida explains how the two “prehensions” (graspings) of the imagination—apprehension and comprehension—suggest this standard of measure: apprehension’s (limitless) surpassing of comprehension’s establishment of a measure at a limited point necessitating a seemingly paradoxical formulation whereby the sublime is best evoked by “median place, an average place of the body which would provide an aesthetic maximum without losing itself in the mathematical infinite” (141). Essentially, despite the stated “absolute” greatness of the object which evokes the sublime, this greatness must be presented in a way which, although not *completely* graspable in sensibility, can

suggest greatness to it. This suggestion of absolute greatness is accomplished, then, through a relationship between the body of the grasping subject and the “sublime body,” the body of the object evoking the sublime. Derrida ends his essay with a quote from Kant perfectly illustrating the necessity of some unit of comparison with which to establish the experience of the sublime, which I will quote a little further than he chose to:

A tree that we estimate by the height of a man may serve as a standard for a mountain, and, if the latter were, say, a mile high, it could serve as the unit for the number that expresses the diameter of the earth, in order to make the latter intuitable; the diameter of the earth could serve as the unit for the planetary system so far as known to us, this for the Milky Way, and the immeasurable multitude of such Milky Way systems, called nebulae, which presumably constitute such a system among themselves in turn, does not allow us to expect any limits here. [...] the sublime does not lie as much in the magnitude of the number as in the fact that as we progress we always arrive at ever greater units; the systematic division of the structure of the world contributes to this, representing to us all that is great in nature as in its turn small, but actually representing our imagination in all its boundlessness, and with it nature, as paling into insignificance beside the ideas of reason if it is supposed to provide a presentation adequate to them. (§26, 256–257)

Not only could this serve as a script for the first zoom in *Powers of Ten*, it also perfectly illustrates both the necessity of an ordinary standard of measure as well as how easily one could transfer this process into the “infinite” movement towards the very small—the second zoom of *Powers of Ten*—justifying Crowther’s assertion that Kant was mistaken in his dismissal of the very small as evocative of the mathematical sublime. *Powers of Ten* also, however, provides a rebuttal to this assertion, as it suggests a lower (infinitesimal) limit for division (or subtraction) of size, but not an upper one (in that we can easily imagine a unit double or an order of magnitude larger than any given unit, but not the converse). Despite ongoing revelations about the quantum world, the only realm in which the infinitesimal is obviously as limitless as the infinite is that of mathematics.

Synthesis

The final concept in this chapter will also be the most oblique, as its role in my dissertation will necessarily remain somewhat obscure until my conclusion. The one aspect of the Kantian sublime thus far elided has been its supposed role in preparing the subject-to-sublimity for the advent of moral law. This concept is fairly easy to grasp, and, in proper Kantian fashion, follows rather neatly from the premises of the sublime. In the context of each *Critique* searching for a higher form of the faculties, and finding in itself the grounds for this higher form, the sublime is clearly an example of a higher form of, in Deleuze's terms, pleasure and pain, and in a simpler formulation, the ascension of aesthetic judgment. If the experience of the sublime elevates us above nature and shows reason's superiority to nature, should this not prepare us for some higher form of moral understanding?

Part of the cost of applying the concept of the mathematical sublime to art-objects is a reduction of the conception of ascension over nature, although that is not to say that art does not prepare us for moral concepts. What it is to say, though, is that some conclusions must be drawn with regards to the creative aspect of the experience of the sublime, being as it is a synthetic act, the apprehension and then reproduction of the grasped manifold in our imagination (§29). The synthetic accord (however disjunctive), whereby the negative feeling of being sensibly overcome vibrates with the positive feeling of reason's ascension over nature and sensibility, produces the supersensible unity of the faculties. Deleuze glosses this moment of synthesis as follows:

Such is the—discordant—accord of imagination and reason: not only reason, *but also the imagination*, has a “suprasensible destination.” In this accord the soul is felt as the indeterminate suprasensible unity of all the faculties; we are ourselves brought back to a focus, as a ‘focal point’ in the suprasensible. It can then be seen that the imagination-reason accord is not simply assumed: it is genuinely *engendered*, engendered in the dissension. This is why common sense which corresponds to the feeling of the sublime is inseparable from a ‘culture’, as the movement of its genesis (§29). And it is within this genesis that we discover that which is fundamental to our destiny. In fact, the Ideas of reason are speculatively indeterminate, practically determined. This is the principle of the difference

between the mathematical sublime of the immense and the dynamic sublime of power (the former brings reason into play from the standpoint of the faculty of knowledge, the latter from the standpoint of the faculty of desire) (§24). So that, in the dynamic sublime, the suprasensible destination of our faculties appears as *that to which a moral being is predestined*. The sense of the sublime is engendered within us in such a way that it prepares a higher finality and prepares us ourselves for the advent of the moral law. (51–52)

This summary introduces some concepts not touched upon in this chapter, primarily the idea that the sublime is inseparable from culture, and secondly that the sublime “prepares a higher finality,” preparing us for the advent of the moral. It seems to follow somewhat naturally from this concept of synthesis and the ascension of the faculties that the culturally located experience of the mathematical sublime, dependent, in the art world, on a rather different set of ‘critical faculties’ than in Kant’s usage, should prepare us for a creative encounter with the work that takes us outside the space of the quotidian. The sublime will, for much of my paper, remain a concept whose *aspects* are deployed in the service of an art-critical thesis, but the question of what an actual encounter with the *feeling* of the sublime would engender is left unaddressed. This question is not central, but will remain an ancillary concern in the course of the investigations into the three works of art.

Conclusion

A model for applying the concept of the mathematical sublime to artworks predicated on certain structural or conceptual similarities between the concept and the work necessarily involves the recontextualization of both. That being said, the architectonics of Kant’s concept are sturdy enough to withstand the misplacement into the field of art criticism without too much damage. As quoted in the introduction, J. Fang, writing in *Philosophia Mathematica* in 1965 made the oft forgotten point that “that the *Critique* is neither externally so fragile that one can willynilly take

it apart, nor internally so rigid that it cannot subsume the progressive elements of modern development” (54). While Fang was speaking of integrating new information (such as non-Euclidean geometry) *into* Kant’s edifice, his point holds for taking aspects of the *Critiques* out of their element. While a faithful reading of the mathematical sublime should exclude artworks from its domain, this does not preclude the use of the concept for art-critical purposes. By taking these key elements from Kant, we can establish an idea of the evocation of the sublime in art that, without being medium specific, would resemble this description:

A subject, encountering an artwork, judges its greatness or smallness based on a unit of measurement immanent to the work. This unit is comprised of the smallest salient element of meaning in the work. Taking this element as a comparative standard, the subject attempts to apprehend and comprehend the work, but the immense size and/or complexity and the differential between the micro and macro elements of the work make any total comprehension impossible and overwhelm the subject with intimations of the ungraspable infinite. This overwhelming can however be accompanied by an insight into the work and the nature of the infinite in the understanding as opposed to the imagination, or, in other words, a rational insight into the purpose and form of the work despite an inability to grasp or apprehend it in its totality. Although this understanding is similar to the familiar dichotomy of the temple and the cathedral, the formal elements implied by the Kantian mathematical sublime provide a much more detailed model for what might constitute this sort of sublime work, or, more accurately, what sort of work might evoke such a response. In order to answer the question of for whom this response might occur, and what particularities of subjectivity could temper it, a phenomenological perspective is needed, the outline of which forms the next chapter.

3. Phenomenology

One of the fundamental difficulties encountered when attempting to speak about *effects* or, even more specifically, evocative power of a work of art is the impossibility of the questions of “for whom” and “why.” While I will endeavor to avoid de-historicizing any of the works at hand, and in fact am arguing that their specific effect is endemic to late-modernist (Western) concerns, my argument still revolves around the locus of *reception* in terms of moment-by-moment apprehension and comprehension of an artwork as it unfolds in time and space for a specific reader/viewer/listener. Any analysis written from this position runs the risk of being simultaneously overly personal and far too general. The risk of over-personalization comes from the possibility of communicating a truth about a work of art in a way that is too dependent on particularities of context. Every artwork is interpreted within a context, but as one fills in the details of this context, the circle of those who share it narrows. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this direction of contextualization ends in solipsism: relating the experience of an artwork in a context so specific it can only apply to one’s own experience. On the other hand, generalized statements about the meaning of a work of art delivered without any details of receptive context often end up equally adrift from anyone’s particular experience of the work, creating an impression of the piece as it might be perceived by a potential subject that will never exist. The search for a middle ground is essentially a search for methodology, a framework that can act as both a base for art-critical statements and a delimiting factor, circumscribing the range of possible responses. This methodology should, in other words, show what can be said about a work of art, in what type of language, and with what standards for the veracity or truth of these produced statements. Methodologies ranging from the political (Marxist analysis) to the formal

(structuralist analysis) conform to these basic requirements, and generally aim at an application outside of the realm of any particular artwork, at transferability and validity outside of context. In contrast, the methodology of this paper is oriented around the idea of a *model*, wherein a range of philosophical concepts are deployed with respect to *particular* works of art and the statements generated by this model only aspire to veracity within this context. This explains my emphasis on Kantian and phenomenological *vocabulary* rather than methodology in the strictest sense, as my investigations into the *Wake*, *Ivan*, and *Gruppen* are not explicitly Kantian or phenomenological, and my intent regarding the deployment of philosophical concepts is idiographic as opposed to nomothetic. That being said, the above quandary regarding the search for a middle ground between solipsism and over-generalization is still applicable, and remains the primary motivation behind my inclusion of phenomenological vocabulary.

There are several possible solutions to the impasse of overcontextualized vs. decontextualized readings, the most successful of which involve an attempt to place these readings in a more objective context, such as recent work analyzing the effects of art within the context of evolutionary development, or studying neurological responses to art.¹¹ While these types of approaches have their merits, they are essentially removing the question of how one experiences art *for oneself*. While scientific readings of the appreciation of art still comment on the perceptual, they are based in a naturalistic conception of the perceptual that finds stability in an external, objective viewpoint grounded in scientific observation. The basic experience of the world as it unfolds for us in consciousness is excluded. These scientific examinations of art are of course valuable contributions to understanding the role art plays in the development of society, and even the development of our minds, but they say little about what we tell ourselves

¹¹ See Dutton's *The Art Instinct*, and Huron's *Sweet Anticipation* for examples of both.

about art, or how we experience art as meaningful in our lives. While incredibly important, and often very rigorous, these types of scientifically minded approaches fall far outside the scope of questions presented here. Barring the objective *scientific* exploration of taste, then, we must find a vocabulary or method which allows for descriptive statements that do not occlude context or reduce the experience of a work to nothing but context. Phenomenology, both in terms of this delimiting and its particular focus, is the methodology of the “for oneself” par excellence.

Inaugurated by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is a descriptive philosophical method which strives to position itself as “presuppositionless.” That is, it has as its base an attempt to interrogate the subjective experience of the world from a position stripped of as many assumptions or presuppositions as possible and, through a description of the perceptual world from this perspective, come to an understanding of both the means through which we perceive the world and the features of this world as it is presented to us in consciousness. The means by which our perceptive mechanisms and the features of the world as presented are made comprehensible and describable are, in Husserl, a “reduction” or “*epoche*.” This reduction is a sustained attitude whereby our usual knowledge of the world around us is put on hold or “bracketed” in order describe the world as it comes to us through consciousness without presuppositions. In later phenomenologists, most notably Martin Heidegger, this “reduction” was replaced with less active or literal bracketings of the world, such as an attitude of questioning which aims to uncover features of the world that a “natural attitude” or naïve perspective would take for granted. Phenomenology’s efficacy as either a foundational vocabulary for art-criticism or as a direct art-critical methodology itself is dependent on two related but separate aspects of this provenance and origin. This bifurcation is related to the historical split between Husserl and Heidegger, but not completely reducible to it. A summary of some core concepts of these two

foundational figures in light of art-critical concepts will serve as an introduction to the philosophical grounds for my use of phenomenological vocabulary.

Husserl

Phenomenology can be seen as a useful art-critical methodology in one of two ways. The first, mostly dependent on insights inaugurated by Husserl, involves its use as a methodology by which one describes the phenomenal experience of regarding a piece of art as we encounter it in consciousness. Different approaches to phenomenological art research embrace and reject various aspects of phenomenological methodology, and some, such as those undertaken here, only utilize the vocabulary without actively engaging in any phenomenological description. That being said, a basic understanding of the precepts of phenomenology will be useful for understanding its vocabulary and possibilities for deployment as an art-critical tool.

The basic foundational method from which phenomenology arises in Husserl is the *ἐποχή*, a “method of parenthesizing” whereby the phenomenologist puts “*out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude*” (*Ideas I*, 61). This method appears in various aspects throughout Husserl’s writings, but for our purposes we can understand it in two contexts. The first being a “world-destroying” attitude that gives us access to the “*phenomenological residuum*” and therefore to understand the structure of intentional consciousness: the noetic (intending) and noematic (intended toward) structures. We could also understand the *ἐποχή* in the context of phenomenology as an art-critical method, seeing how it and other phenomenological descriptive methods can allow us to create a “reduced” or “presuppositionless” description of an art-object (or art-event), allowing for valuable insight into features of the object (or event) that might be obscured by the usual “naïve” or “natural” attitude

with which we encounter usually encounter works.¹² This use of phenomenological methods or vocabulary is efficacious for direct description of works of arts in clear and specific language, allowing for a higher granularity of descriptions of elements of both plastic and event-based works as well as broader gestalt-type descriptions of these works.

A simple way to understand the core of this type of method would be to attend to the Husserlian concept of the “horizon” touched upon in my introduction. Revisiting the concept here, we can turn to a chapter of Husserl’s *Ideas I*, §47 *The Natural World as Correlate of Consciousness*, wherein he describes how an object presents itself to us as actual and therefore experienceable. Husserl begins this section by defining “simple experience” as the “presentive intuitions” including perception, recollection etc., through which physical things are presented as “intentional unities persisting continuously in multiplicities of appearances” (105). In other words, it is our active intuitive relationship to the world of objects which allows us to perceive them as unities through time, to identify an object as the same object throughout time and from various spatial perspectives. These temporal or spatial perspectives forming the “multiplicity of appearances” our “presentive intuition” presents to us as unified objects or “intentional unities.” In order to better understand how these unified impressions are presented to us in consciousness, we can perform the phenomenological “move” of the ἐποχή in the sense of a world-destroying bracketing that allows us to focus on those elements and structures of consciousness that remain in the absence of the physical world. Husserl reminds us that “No limits check us in the process of conceiving the destruction of Objectivity of something physical—as the correlate of

¹² Note that this perspective need not privilege the visual aspects of perceptual experience. See Ihde (2007) for examples of aural and bodily phenomenological interpretations of art.

[experiential] consciousness” (105).¹³ That is, we can apply the ἐποχή and define objectivity as the *only* correlate of conscious experience. Husserl further clarifies, writing that:

It must always be borne in mind that whatever physical things are—the only physical things about which we can make statements, the only ones about the being or non-being, the being-thus or being-otherwise of which we can disagree and make rational decisions—*they are as experienceable physical things*. It is experience alone that prescribes their sense; and, since we are speaking of physical things in fact, it is actual experience alone which does so in its definitely ordered experiential concatenations. (105)

The first sentence of this statement is fairly straightforward: the only type of “things” we can discuss rationally are those we have experienced and, therefore the experience of which is structured by our consciousness in the manner described above. The second sentence is a little more complex in that the phrase “definitely ordered experiential concatenations” introduces notions of temporality and the essential connectedness or linked-togetherness of our experiences through time. This is an important facet of Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology and of the phenomenological perspective, in general and in an art-critical context: it must always be based in a temporal understanding of experience—a linked series of impressions moving forward through time, not a synchronic snapshot. Husserl continues this paragraph with a concise definition of the phenomenological perspective on transcendental reality:

But if the kinds of mental processes included under experiences, and especially the fundamental mental process of perceiving physical things, can be submitted by us to an *eidetic* consideration, and if we can discern essential possibilities and necessities in them (as obviously we can) and can therefore eidetically trace the essentially possible variants of motivated experiential concatenations: then the result is the correlate of our factual experience, called “*the actual world*,” as *one special case among a multitude of possible worlds and [non-worlds]* which, for their part, are nothing else but the *correlates of essentially possible variants of the idea*, “*an experiencing consciousness*,” with more or less orderly concatenations of experience. As a consequence one must not let oneself be deceived by speaking of the physical thing as transcending consciousness or as “existing in itself”.

¹³ The translation reads “experimental consciousness” where it should be “experiential” (Erfahrungsbewußtseins).

(106)¹⁴

What Husserl is describing here is the fact that because we can submit the processes and actions which make up our perceptive process to internal, eidetic analysis (one of the bases of phenomenology) we can conclude that these processes, without which we could not perceive the world, are varied and subjective and therefore what makes up “actual reality” is in fact *one of many* possible worlds. Each of these worlds is an ordered presentation received in the concatenation of experience (the linked chain of individuated perceptions that allow us to understand, for instance, individual objects as such and not as a series of differentiated sense impressions). The “actual world,” then, is not something we can think of as absolutely transcending consciousness, but is in fact that very possible world composed through experiencing consciousness. However, an important aspect of this description is elided in the English translation through its use of the word “actual” in place of two distinct German words. In the first quotation above, we read that it is “actual experience” alone which prescribes the sense of physical objects. In this sentence, the word used is the German “*aktuell*,” and what Husserl is establishing is that the sense of physical objects is given to us in actual concrete and *present* experience, as opposed to in fantasy or memory. This is important in that many other aspects of our experience of the real world do *not* need to be prescribed by actual experience in this sense, but may but put forth in memory or imagination. Physical objects, however, as far as they are given to us *as physical objects* which we can discuss rationally, are only given in actual experience (*aktuelle Erfahrung*). It is this actual, present experience, the experiential given consciousness of objects, in which objects can be discussed.

¹⁴ The translation renders *Umwelten* as “possible worlds” (*Umwelten*), when it should read “non-worlds.”

The second use of the English word “actual” comes in the second quotation where Husserl writes that the correlate of our factual experience is the “*the actual world,*” as “*one special case among a multitude of possible worlds*” (106). The German word deployed here is *wirkliche*, more accurately translated as “real.” What is important in this differentiation is that, opposed to our first example where Husserl establishes the important concept of actuality as identical with the experienceable, in the second example Husserl is expressing the idea that “the real world” (*die wirkliche Welt*), is in fact only one special case (in that it belongs to us at any given moment) among the multitude of possible worlds, each of which is a correlate of another possible experiencing consciousness. What is essential is not this “special case” itself, but the experiencing, intending consciousness, what Husserl will call the “noetic correlate.”

Husserl goes on to clarify that the predicate “experienceable” does not signify a logical *possibility* whereby an object could potentially be experienced by some possible subject, but must be a “possibility *motivated* in the concatenations of experience” (106). Again, the emphasis is on intentionality, and the experiencing consciousness, which phenomenology alone can reveal the “*essential structures*” of. The aforementioned noetic and noematic aspects of consciousness are revealed as objects of the “purely eidetic exploration” of phenomenology (107). Rather than thinking of the objects that are possible to experience but have not as yet been experienced as determined by their logical possibility of being experienced, Husserl wants us to conceive of them as belonging to:

[T]he undetermined but *determinable* horizon of my experiential actuality at the particular time. This horizon, however, is the correlate of the components of undeterminateness essentially attached to experiences of physical things themselves; and those components [...] leave open possibilities of fulfillment which are by no means completely undetermined but are, on the contrary, motivated possibilities *predelineated with respect to their essential type*. Any actual experience [*aktuelle Erfahrung*] points beyond itself to possible experiences which, in turn, point to new possible experiences and so [on] ad

infinitum. [...] Any hypothetical formulation in practical life or in empirical science relates to this changing but always co-positing horizon whereby the positing of the world receives its essential sense. (107)

Here we can read many of the core themes of Husserlian phenomenology, the first being the delineation of the realm of the possible as the horizon of as-yet-undetermined objects. As we encounter these objects in experiencing consciousness (in motivated intentionality) they are already predelineated: we encounter them in a manner that is structured by those things we have already encountered (intended towards) in consciousness. The temporal aspect of this is an important element of phenomenological description: these determinable objects come towards us against a changing horizon of anticipation and memory, those things we have already encountered are retained in memory (retention) and structure the ways in which we anticipate (protention) the horizon of possible objects. The horizon in Husserl is always an *intentional* horizon: it is structured by our consciousness and what appears on this horizon is anticipated and intended towards in a manner structured by our previous experiences in consciousness.

Through the ἐποχή we can have access to these intentional structures and understand how we experience the world *for ourselves*, a methodology important for mapping the immanent structures of consciousness as well as the structures of internal time consciousness. While this paper will not rely on the ἐποχή or any strictly phenomenological methods, the concepts and vocabulary emergent from these methodologies are important for many art-critical practices in showing how our experiential consciousness intends towards specific events or objects in time, and how undetermined objects are always determinable “*with respect to their essential type.*” Our encounters with novel objects and events are predicated on those encounters which have preceded them. The need for phenomenological language in this dissertation is also predicated on a need to describe the *subjective effects* of a work of art for a person or people in general. The

phenomenology of Husserl provides an excellent lexical and conceptual toolkit for this type of description in that it allows one to speak of, for example, a piece of music *as it flows through one's consciousness*. In order to think these processes in a more cultural/historical sense rather than on the basic level of intending consciousness, we will turn to Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger

Another way in which phenomenology can be useful for art-critical purposes relies on a more explicitly Heideggerian interpretation of phenomenology and involves a different sort of "reduced" attitude, one directed more at personal and cultural assumptions rather than purely perceptual aesthetic ones. As opposed to Husserl's perceptual, experiential concept of a "horizon," the Heideggerian version of the concept is deployed as a background against which to investigate the particularities of human being (*Dasein*). It is this question of being which his masterpiece, *Being and Time* is concerned. While discussing *Being and Time* I will adopt the usual convention of leaving *Dasein* untranslated and rendering the word "being" in its ontologically-oriented noun form as "Being." Quotations are from the Macquarrie & Robinson translation and citations are from the German pagination.

The image of the horizon appears on the first page of *Being and Time* as Heidegger defines his project, writing that "Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of *Being* and to do so concretely. Our provisional aim is the Interpretation of *time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being" (1). The translator's note to this section clarifies, explaining how:

[T]hroughout this work the word "horizon" is used with a connotation somewhat

different from that to which the English-speaking reader is likely to be accustomed. We tend to think of a horizon as something which we may widen or extend or go beyond; Heidegger, however, seems to think of it rather as something which we can neither widen nor go beyond, but which provides the limits for certain intellectual activities performed “within” it. (1)

This is the first appearance of the thought form mentioned in my introduction whereby something is made to stand as both the grounds for thought and the limits beyond which it cannot pass. This type of horizon is a consequence of several aspects of the particular way of being that characterizes Dasein’s way of being in the world. One aspect of Dasein’s way of being in the world is especially important for Heidegger, which is that Dasein is that being which is concerned with and capable of understanding Being itself (17). Much of *Being and Time* is concerned with the ways in which Dasein comports itself with regards to its own being, and how our way of being in the world is characterized by this concern. This is one of the aspects of Heidegger’s phenomenology which differentiates itself from Husserl’s: Heidegger does not begin from a “presuppositionless” standpoint, but from a standpoint that presupposes some understanding, however vague, of our own being. For Heidegger, if we begin with a worldless “I,” detached from *any* horizon of understanding, we have presupposed too little (315). By beginning with the natural everyday understanding of Being, we reveal certain structures of our way of being in the world, “not just any accidental structures, but essential ones which, in every kind of Being that factual Dasein may possess, persist as determinative for the character of its Being” (17).

We can think of the “factically” determined nature of Dasein as being characterized by the experience of being thrown into, or falling into the world, in that we experience the locatedness of our being in the world not as a choice but as an inertial outcome of our being born. One of Heidegger’s earliest definitions of facticity is in his *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of*

Facticity:

“*Facticity*” is the designation we will use for the character of the being of “our” “own” *Dasein*. More precisely, this expression means: *in each case* “this” *Dasein* in its being-there *for a while at a particular time* (the phenomenon of the “awhileness” of temporal particularity, cf. “whiling,” tarrying for a while, not running away, being-*there-at-home-in...*, being-*there-involved-in...*, the being-there of *Dasein*) insofar as it is, in the character of its being, “*there*” *in the manner of being*. Being-there *in the manner of be-ing* means: not, and never, to be there primarily as an *object* of intuition and definition on the basis of intuition, as an *object* of which we merely take cognizance and have knowledge. Rather *Dasein* is *there* for itself in the “how” of its ownmost being. The how of its being opens up and circumscribes the respective “there” which is possible for a while at the particular time. Being—transitive: to be factual life! Being is itself never the possible object of a having, since what is at issue in it, what it comes to, is itself: *being*. (5)

Before embarking on an analysis of this passage it is worth remarking on the constitutive and limiting role of facticity not only in our own “being-there” in the world, but in founding philosophy as a questioning investigation. Even the philosophical mode of “commentary” amounts to an exegesis, and, as Heidegger reminds us only pages later, ἐξήγησις = ἐρμηνεία: hermeneutics and therefore exegetical commentary too belong to the realm of factual interpretation, the analytic of *Dasein* being distinguished by its *inward* turn—the hermeneutics of the self.

Heidegger’s passage begins with locating facticity in this “self,” and then proceeds to ground it in the temporality of its own being. This move is an incredibly important one, and must remain in the background of all understandings of “factual” or “worlded” being throughout this paper, as it is only *in time* that we interpret and are receptive to the world around us in general or art in its specifics. This fact will, of course, be obvious while discussing the more overtly temporal unfoldings of music and film, but must remain insistently present even while discussing literature, for without a grounding in an unfolding of specific time and place, the subject-to-art and potential subject-to-sublimity cannot be understood as worlded, or grounded in and

delimited by the specific world that allows for this sublimity to appear. This facticity of Dasein is, then, grounded in the *time* of Dasein's being-there, adding a predicative "whenness" to the already split "being" and "there" of the term—a term to which Heidegger then adds a "howness," ensuring that we never understand Dasein as a simple object of intuition (a mere "is") without the important implied *interpretive* nature of the questioning "how" as part of the locating "thereness" of that particular being. To rephrase: Dasein's Being is predicated upon a temporal element: Dasein must be "when;" Dasein must be "there," i.e. located in a particularity of place; but this "thereness" or "placeness" is predicated upon a "how," a reason or interpretable aspect of its being. Any *locatedness* (thereness) is thereby predicated upon a *temporal* (whenness) and an *interpretable* and *interpreting* (howness) background. The duality of this "how" is one of the roots of Heidegger's difficult use of reflexive and non-personal language: an attempt to express the almost-ineffable nature of the interpreting/interpreted grounding of being.

The term can also, however, be understood on a less abstract level as those *culturally* limiting and grounding factors that color our world and its possibilities for interpretation. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger frames self-understanding as follows:

As something factual, Dasein's projection of itself understandingly is in each case already alongside a world that has been discovered. From this world it takes its possibilities, and it does so at first in accordance with the way things have been interpreted by the "they." This interpretation has already restricted the possible options of choice to what lies within the range of the familiar, the attainable, the respectable—that which is fitting and proper. (195)

This is a much broader definition, and one which allows us to see Dasein's factual "projection of itself" as part of a continuum of philosophical concepts including Badiou's idea of world as "a machine for localizing being" or Lacan's "big other" in that each of these concerns the production by the "they" of the world into which we are thrown. Taking a cue from Catherine Malabou's *The Future of Hegel*, we will take a small detour here to discuss the especially

profitable link between facticity and “thrownness” and the Aristotelian concept of ἐξίς.

In the context of her reading of Hegel’s *Anthropology*, Malabou develops a reading of ἐξίς dependent on the interplay between the two verbs πάσχειν (to be acted upon) and ἐνεργεῖν (to act) in defining the νοῦς (40). Malabou’s very Heideggerian reading goes on to argue that although ἐξίς is usually translated as “stable disposition” or “state” and strongly linked to the notion of habit, this definition distorts the inherent *plasticity* of the νοῦς it characterizes, its ability to act as well as be acted upon (41). What characterizes ἐξίς for Malabou is its status as both passive and active: it characterizes the νοῦς as having a “way of being with a double sense—of fashioning and being fashioned” (41). She then follows Aristotle in introducing ἄνθρωπος and defining it as “that entity must likely to develop habits,” and continues by summarizing an example of Aristotle’s meant to explain the passive and active principles behind ἐξίς (and thus of the νοῦς and ἄνθρωπος):

To explain the originary unity of πάσχειν and ἐνεργεῖν Aristotle uses the example of the man who acquires the habit of knowledge. Leaving behind his initial state of ignorance, man is subjected to the effects of his apprenticeship, his learning. But as soon as knowledge is actually gained, this “subjection” becomes the possibility of an actualization, and hence of an action: man has the power freely to exercise his knowledge. (41)

We can easily see several Heideggerian links here. First, ἄνθρωπος is clearly an antecedent of Dasein in terms of the structure of its characterization by the likelihood of its comportment towards in the former, habit, and in the latter, Being. Even more explicitly, the Aristotelian conception of νοῦς is clearly related to Dasein’s “thrownness” into the world, as Heidegger himself made clear in his *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, where he defined νοῦς as the “*basic condition of the possibility of being-in-the-world*, which as such stands out beyond the particular concrete being of individual human beings” (135). This definition allows us to understand another aspect of the Heideggerian conception of Being, in that we can understand

νοῦς as the condition of our ability to interpret the world. This maintains the Aristotelian characterization of νοῦς as φῶς, reconceptualized by Heidegger as “the light in which the look of something is seen,” equating illumination’s relation to color in αἰσθησις to the “fundamental” relation between νοῦς and Being (135). Additionally, we can find in the definition ἐξίς some of the dual characteristics of facticity, in that it can be understood as a passive base for the institution of world-disclosure as well as an active principle guiding one’s active participation in this process of world disclosure. In terms of a useable art-critical concept, we can understand facticity as a culturally limiting way of being from which we encounter artworks, for instance, as well as the basis for the hermeneutic principles with which we interpret them. What the link to ἐξίς provides is an understanding that the concept of our *disposition* or state of being in relation to a world (or work of art) is characterized by our “thrownness” into the world as well as an active participatory mode of engagement with that world. This brings up two important Heideggerian points: that of the question of the “hermeneutic circle” and that of the notion of “care.”

If we think of the Aristotelian example of the man acquiring the habit of knowledge, and then using this habit to transform himself and the world through a process of uncovering, eventually we must ask how this habit is acquired in the first place, presumably without any tendency towards the acquisition of knowledge to initiate it. This is a basic form of the question of the circle: how our facility of interpreting the world arises in a world whose disclosure requires this very facility. This question appears in many forms in ontological as well as art-critical contexts—sometimes mereological forms where we question how we can understand the parts of a work in relation to the whole if both depend on the priority of the other, sometimes in world-historical forms where we question how we can understand a work without the full

cultural context in which it was formed, and which it helped in forming. These and many other appearances of the question conform to the same basic structure, and Heidegger's response is in some ways adequate for them all. He writes that:

When one talks of the "circle" in understanding, one expresses a failure to recognize two things: (1) that understanding as such makes up a basic kind of Dasein's Being, and (2) that this Being is constituted as care. To deny the circle, to make a secret of it, or even to want to overcome it, means finally to reinforce this failure. We must rather endeavor to leap into the "circle," primordially and wholly, so that even at the start of the analysis of Dasein we make sure that we have a full view of Dasein's circular Being. If, in the ontology of Dasein, we "take our departure" from a worldless "I" in order to provide this "I" with an Object and an ontologically baseless relation to that Object, then we have "presupposed" not too much, but *too little*. (363)

The differentiation from Husserl should be clear: for Heidegger the sort of "presuppositionless" phenomenology as exemplified by Husserl's method of the *ἐποχή* fails because it does not take enough of Dasein's characteristics into account; it is not a worlded account of the world, and therefore presumes too little. Our analyses of the world, or of specific objects such as art objects within the world, should, for Heidegger, involve this circle:

[W]e are compelled to follow the circle. This is neither a makeshift or a defect. To enter upon the path is the strength of thought, to continue on it is the feast of thought, assuming thinking is a craft. Not only is the main step from work to art a circle like the step from art to work, but every separate step that we attempt circles this circle. In order to discover the nature of the art that really prevails in the work, let us go to the actual work and ask the work what and how it is. (*The Origin of the Work of Art*, 18)

This "going to the actual work" involves a type of interpretation *rooted* in the world of the work, not assuming a position external to it. Outside of the strictly ontological realm, we can think of this concept of leaping into the circle as a way of entering discourse understandingly, of being part of the world we attempt to understand. Michel Foucault expressed a version of this type of leaping in his *The Discourse on Language*, saying:

I would really like to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture, as into all the

others I shall be delivering, perhaps over the years ahead. I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would precede from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance. (251)

Although Foucault is addressing the world of discourse (and specifically the role institutions have in establishing an ordered world of discourse), we can read into his wish many of the ontological themes of the hermeneutic leap: the attentiveness (care) that constitutes the subject; the fact that one can be called towards a particular path (even the use of this word echoes Heidegger); and an aspect of Dasein's experience of the world we have yet to address, that of anxiety in the face of the world.

When Foucault describes his anxiety at entering the stream of discourse, we can understand this as a specific anxiety relating to a particular demand to enter a particular discourse, or we can read it in a more general sense as describing the anxiety characteristic of Dasein's way of being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, anxiety (*Angst*) manifests as a consequence of our capacity for freedom in the world; and as a state of mind, anxiousness is a way of being in the world which functions as both disclosed and disclosing. When we are in a state of anxiousness we are *disclosed* to ourselves as individuals, as isolated. This state of anxious individuality then has the effect of *disclosing* the world to us in a way we did not have access to before. Rather than the typical idea of isolation as removing us from the world, Heidegger conceives of this anxious isolation as in fact bringing us face to face with the world as such, and with ourselves as Being-in-the-world (188). He goes so far as to define being in the world in terms of anxiety, writing: "*Being-in-the-world itself is that in the face of which anxiety is anxious*" (187). A good way of thinking about these concepts is in terms of Existentialism in the

literary tradition: "je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde" being a more or less perfect expression of the world-disclosing nature of anxious isolation (Camus, *L'étranger*, 98). Our factual way of being in the world is disclosed to us through those moments when our isolation reveals the particularities of our thrownness into the world. As far as understanding this idea in art-critical applications, we can think of it in terms of *L'étranger*, where a character comes to embody this sort of anxious moment, or we can think of it in terms of the *reader's* anxiety. We could ask what type of work of art would be capable of inducing this type of anxiety—of reinforcing one's facticity, or of emphasizing its own facticity as cultural object. In order to begin answering these questions, we will turn to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

4. Finnegans Wake

Introduction: Inside/Outside

When Foucault writes that he “would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices,” he is expressing a wish to be both enveloped in language and able to understand it (*Discourse on Language*, 251). In the last chapter, this enveloping was linked to Heidegger’s notion of *Angst* or anxiety and how this anxiety reveals certain ways of being in the world. In this context, Foucault’s wish is both inevitable and impossible. We are always already enmeshed in the language of the world into which we are thrown, but even our birth language remains opaque to us in some ways; we can never become fully part of it in the sense of perfect understanding. This essentially double relationship we have with language can be explored from many perspectives, but literature is perhaps the easiest example. The world of a text provides a metonymic example, or model, for the world at large, and allows us to either observe a character’s relationship to the world (as in the example from Camus), or to observe our own thrownness into the language of the text. The book which is the focus of this chapter, James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, can be thought of, like any other text, as a world unto itself as well as merely a part of the world in which we read it. As anyone who has opened the book knows, however, *Finnegans Wake* is in many ways not like any other book.

There are diverse critical and readerly approaches to the uniqueness of *Finnegans Wake*, including its method of creation, well documented by the thousands of pages of its creator’s drafts and notes. We could also approach it simply on the basis of content, pointing to its multilingual argot, cast of mutable characters, and the many intertextual references that accrue on

every page. We could also point towards the often dizzying experience of reading the text, rarely undertaken without accompanying texts: the many helpful guides, glossaries, and annotations created by scholars of the book. All of these approaches to the *Wake*'s uniqueness emphasize the book's interesting relationship to the "not-book": to the world outside the text. The presence of thousands of pages of Joyce's drafts and notes (currently being heroically transcribed as the Notebooks at Buffalo series) allows for genetic readings highlighting the text in process—the thousands of ur-texts created on the way to the final text. Focusing on the text's language and cast emphasizes the cultural, literary, and linguistic promiscuity of its borrowings, establishing just how much outside knowledge is necessary for even a cursory reading. Finally, the immensely helpful nature of the many glossaries and indexes, particularly Ronald McHugh's *Annotation to Finnegans Wake*, means that very few serious read-throughs of the book are not accompanied by one or more open texts besides the *Wake*. In spite of this proliferation of externality, the *Wake* is also one of the most internally-oriented books ever written, often considered a universe unto itself. While the density of its language works to draw the reader into its particular aesthetic universe, the sheer breadth of the universal themes and references often makes one feel as if the book contains reference to everything possible, often evoking comparisons to a machine for generating meaning.¹⁵ The differential between these two extremes is responsible for much of the anxiety the work can induce: the work forces one to constantly go outside it in order to understand it, while making the reader feel as if they are engulfed by the text itself. Before moving on to an analysis of this differential, and some of the strategies that have emerged through critical analyses of the work, it is important to understand what it is like to encounter the work and read through it. The family around whom the story of *Finnegans Wake*

¹⁵ Especially in Patrick O'Neill's *Impossible Joyce*, a book-length development of Eco's original assertion.

revolves includes the father, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (HCE); the mother, Anna Livia Plurabelle (ALP); twin brothers Shem and Shaun; and sister Issy. Although they transmute in and out of various literary and historical characters, the archetypes into which they shift, and the constellations of references that surround each, are relatively stable. As Shem, the writer and forger, is strongly identified with Joyce himself, the chapter (1.6) about him serves as an especially apt introduction to the themes of internal/external relationships in *Finnegans Wake*. Relying on research of the Joyce community in the form of explanations, glossaries, and annotations, the following will be a brief explanation of the chapter and its themes, standing in for the impossible task of introducing the book as a whole.

Reading: Shem the Penman

Finnegans Wake opens, famously, with a continuation of its last sentence, as “A way a lone a last a loved a long the” (628) on the final page carries over into “riverrun past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of short to bend of bay” (3) on the first, and proceeds to hurl its readers into a whirlwind of language, characters, and events. After being introduced to Finnegan and the planned funereal consumption of his corpse, the book moves on through several episodes to introduce the central character of the text, HCE, and the central crisis of the text: his fall. After being accused of some sexual impropriety involving two young girls in a park, he is eventually brought to trial where an important piece of evidence is missing: a letter written by his wife, ALP. The letter, as it transpires, was dictated by ALP to one of her sons, Shem the Penman, before being handed over for delivery to her other son, Shaun the Postman. The letter, however, ends up in a midden heap being pecked at by a hen. Following a series of illuminating riddles, two famous character portraits are sketched: one of Shem and one of ALP. While ALP’s chapter is one of the most

beautiful and certainly the most quoted in the book, Shem's is equally illuminating, focusing on the act of writing and the person of the writer in detail. Introducing what is perhaps the most complete reading of the chapter, Finn Fordham explains that he chose this chapter to begin his tour of the *Wake* because "its basic intentions are quite easily inferred: it is a Portrait of the Writer as an Inadequate Human drawn by his brother Shaun" (*Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake*, 39). Its suitability for discussion here is not primarily based on its simplicity, but rather a complexity that Fordham subtly acknowledges with his reference to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The chapter is in some ways as straightforward as *Finnegans Wake* ever gets, but it also elaborates the most complex textual relationship between the book and its creator. The plot of the chapter, as far as it has one, moves the description of Shem by Shaun from the former's habits and appearance to his writings, his self-administered tattoos, his ramshackle dwelling, and finally to his rescue by his mother, ALP. Along the way we learn a lot about Shaun's view of Shem, and something about the relationship between the brothers, especially once they are transformed into the figures of JUSTIUS (Shaun) and MERCIUS (Shem, finally speaking for himself). Any reader could agree that Shem is constantly portrayed as the "Other" by his brother (and even by himself), but the various guises under which this portrayal appears, and what it means, inspire wildly different readings. By exploring some of these themes, some of the readings they inspire, and finally, the implications of these themes for the question of how Joyce relates to the character of Shem, we can get a sense of what it is like to read and work with the *Wake*, and how Joyce, his text, and his readers relate to one another through this process.

Joyce's earliest note on the content of this chapter reads "Cain-Ham (Shem)-Esau-Jim the Penman," and as Ingeborg Landuyt points out: "[m]ost of Joyce's models in this chapter are eldest sons, but usually not favored ones: Cain's sacrifice was not accepted, Ham's posterity was

cursed, and Esau was cheated out of his birthright by the cunning Jacob” (Making Herself Tidal: Chapter 1.8”, 143). The descriptions of Shem that make up most of the chapter are mostly dictated by his brother and antagonist, Shaun the Postman, who stands for the other half of these iconic brothers, and as such are filled with vitriolic description. The chapter begins with a slanderous description of his character and physical appearance:

Shem is as short for Shemus as Jem is joky for Jacob. A few toughnecks are still getable who pretend that aboriginally he was of respectable stemming (he was an outlex between the lines of Ragonar Blaubarb and Horrild Hairwire and an inlaw to Capt. the Hon. and Rev. Mr Bbyrdwood de Trop Blogg was among his most distant connections) but every honest to goodness man in the land of the space of today knows that his back life will not stand being written about in black and white. Putting truth and untruth together at a shot may be made at what this hybrid actually was like to look at.

Shem’s bodily getup, it seems, included an adze of a skull, an eight of a larkseye, the whoel of a nose, on numb arm up a sleeve, fortytwo hairs off his uncrown, eighteen to his mock lip, a trio of barbels from his megageg chin (sowman’s son), the wrong shoulder higher than the right, all ears, an artificial tongue with a natural curl, not a foot to stand on, a handful of thumbs, a blind stomach, a deaf heart, a loose liver, two fifths of one buttock, one gleetsteen avoirdupoier for him, a manroot of all evil, a salmonkelt’s thinskin, eelsblood in his cold tows, a bladder tristended [...]. (169)

In terms of thematic content around the character of Shem, we can immediately see links to Joyce himself (Shemus being the Gaelic equivalent of James, as Joyce noted in a 1926 letter to Harriet Weaver), as well as to deception, being outside the law (lex being Latin for law), and association with the lowerclass (Blogg being a mock-English working class name), as well as non-white races (aboriginally). To compound the links to criminality, the aboriginals, and “otherness,” Shem’s name is also, as mentioned in Joyce’s notes, a reference to Jim the Penman, a notorious forger who was sentenced to “transportation” and shipped off to Australia in 1857¹⁶ (*Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, 169). These themes will multiply in the course of the chapter and become deeply intertwined with others as associations pile up. The many references to fish

¹⁶ Jim the Penman’s sentence noted in *Once a week, an illustrated miscellany of literature, art, science & popular information. Vol.1, no. 1* (Bradbury & Evans, Oxford, 1867), 36.

contribute, of course, to the general “fishiness” of a forger and faker, but their filial associations (sowman’s son = salmon’s son, salmonkelts = salmon’s spawn) suggest a link to the Christian tradition, as Patricia Morely pointed out in her 1960 article on “The Hidden Defence of Shem the Penman” (267–270). That there could be antithetical suggestions hidden within what purports to be Shaun’s reading of Shem’s character suggests that every reading can contain its opposite, and that the portrayal is more complex than it first appears.

A major theme of the chapter, that of the tension between truth and forgery in literature (“will not stand being written about in black and white”), is already evident in the first chapter, as is its link to questions of class and race (Australia, the lowness of names, etc.). These themes are further compounded by the list of Shem’s physical characteristics in the next paragraph. While comedic, this list was, as Landuyt points out, “influenced by contemporary studies of the predestined delinquent such as the descriptions and investigations by the Italian sociologist Cesare Lombroso” (147). Shem’s asymmetry and deformities are all markers of what Lombroso would consider irredeemably criminal types. Landuyt explains that “[f]urther reference of this kind in this chapter are to his ambidexterity, the stink and filth in which he lives, and his tattoos and dark skin, which are other typical Lombrosian attributes”. (148)

One of the most important themes in the chapter is embodied in the link between tattoos and dark skin, writing and race. As Finn Fordham explains, Shem the compulsive writer is constantly opposed to the graphophobic Shaun, who in his role as postman “may control as much as carry the message” (42). Graphophobia versus graphomania comes to its head in the most famous scene in the chapter, in which Shem uses his own shit to make ink which he then uses to write on his own body. This passage, most of which is written in Latin, establishes the filthiness of Shem, the links between filth and writing, and between writing and the darkening of skin. As

Fordham explains, “[t]he fact that Shem’s writing darkens the norm of the clean white body, betrays a racial distinction at work in Shaun’s graphophobia. The writing makes Shem darker and darker, blacker and blacker” (42). Throughout the chapter Shaun will consistently attempt to establish himself as the cleaner, higher, whiter twin, opposed to Shem’s dirty, lowly blackness. This racial categorization (which Fordham found was explicitly linked to the KKK in the first draft (43)), continues over the chapter, but becomes further complicated by many other themes, especially that of the question of artificiality.

Having established that Shem has a “blind stomach” and an “artificial tongue with a natural curl,” his taste and speech is further insulted on the following page, as it is revealed that “his lowness creeped out first via foodstuffs. So low was he that he preferred Gibsen’s tea-time salmon tinned as inexpensive as pleasing, to the plumpest roeheavy lax” (170). While there is certainly much here to remind us of class snobbishness, there is also the link to the great Joycean theme of artifice. From Stephen Daedalus in *Portrait* (which ends with the line “old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead” [253]) and *Ulysses* to Shem in the *Wake*, artifice, artificiality, and forgery are the marked characteristics of a good artist, and here we see, in the eyes of Shaun, their associations with the lower-class. Shem’s lowness and his status as a “sham” are exposed through his taste for the artificial.

One major difficulty of delineating any specific themes in *Finnegans Wake*, however, is the omnipresent question of which theme is subordinate to which. The theme of artifice looms large over the book as a whole, and various critics have tied it, in the context of this chapter, to themes such as alchemy, Giordano Bruno’s theories of history, and Catholic confessionals. While none of these readings negates the possibility of the others, the proliferation of possible overarching themes makes summation difficult and the establishment of a dominant theme nearly

impossible. Before moving on to the question of autobiography and how Joyce relates to the character of Shem, briefly exploring each of these critical readings should impart a sense of the multiplicities of reading inherent in any study of the *Wake*.

Barbara DiBernard's book *Alchemy and Finnegans Wake* explores the many alchemical associations built up around Shem as "alchemist" (*Finnegans Wake*, 185), particularly the concepts of transforming base metals into gold and its metaphorical deployment in the scene where Shem uses his feces as ink to write on his own body. That the description of this act appears in the Latin reminds us, as DiBernard writes, of "the need of alchemists to write obscurely to prevent the unworthy from using this powerful knowledge wrongly" (134). For DiBernard, who concludes her book with the following paragraph, the whole movement of the chapter, and *Finnegans Wake* as whole, shows that

[A]ll artists and alchemists who work to transcend and transmute and therefore escape the world by means of their art are shams. The artist/alchemist, however, can unite the physical and the spiritual by operating on both levels simultaneously, turning the rubbish of life into art or the Philosopher's Stone, yet not ignoring or negating its earthly origins. As *Finnegans Wake* puts it: "The tasks above are as the flasks below, saith the emerald canticle of Hermes... (137)

DiBernard's reading is cogent with what we have seen even of the first two paragraphs of the chapter, and it is easy to see how a reading of Shem (and Joyce) as "alchemists" could be constructed: the tension between artifice and the natural or the spiritual and the physical resolved through an alchemical transformation that maintains the binary opposition. While this reading seems to subordinate the theme of writing to that of alchemy and transformation, it is also worth noting here that DiBernard's final quote, underlining the alchemical content of the chapter, would be much more revealing if she continued it for a few more words, as in context it reads "saith the emerald canticle of Hermes and all's loth and pleasesir, are we told, on excellent inkbottle authority" (263). While one might understand DiBernard's inclination to end her book

with such a beautiful alchemical quote, it is interesting that the inclusion of a few more words would *explicitly* link the line back to Shem's fecal ink bottle, and the question of writing and authority.

Kristin Olson's 2006 article "The Pluralities of 'Parole': Giordano Bruno and the Cyclical Trope of Language in *Finnegans Wake*" reads the above reference to Hermes in a very different context. Although a great deal of her paper is a reading of the "Hermetic" themes of the *Wake*, Olson's argument hinges around a thesis whereby Joyce's work embodies the activation of the Saussurean concept of *parole* over *langue*. Although she does argue for Joyce's active *use* of the word *parole* in a Saussurean context, most of her paper is more specifically about the "protean function of language inherent" in the term (255). By linking the two occurrences of the word *parole* in the text to other terms denoting linguistic instability, she advances a reading whereby the circulations, recursions and mutations of history and character are identical movements in the language of the book. One of the key themes in this argument is the "concomitance Joyce activates among Bruno, Hermes, Hermeticism, and Shem/'alshemist'/'Shamman" [representing] a cyclical historical subjectivity in linguistic circularity" (258). Beginning with the well-known theme of historical recurrence in Bruno and Vico, Olson goes on to show how the link between the Greek god Hermes's association with messages and passwords links to the hermetic and alchemical writings of Hermes Trismegistus through their association in the *Wake*. This thesis is predicated on the research undertaken by John Bishop's *Joyce's Book of the Dark* where he delineated the myriad connections between the *Wake* and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, but also on his thesis regarding the status of the *Wake* as a "nightbook" being dreamed by a sleeping character. While Bishop's book is one of the most thorough and illuminating written on the *Wake*, it also relies on an unusually holistic approach that is difficult to summarize. Bishop's

central points of reference—the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, Freud, and Vico—were familiar to *Wake* readers and researchers before his work; however, he not only fully worked out the scope of their integration into the book, but did so in the context of one of the most persuasive overarching cosmologies for the *Wake* as a whole. The premise (well supported by Joyce's statements) of the text of the *Wake* being dreamed by a sleeping consciousness allows for more mutability among characters and for the existence of a *motivational structure* behind the various condensations and displacements of character, plot, and setting.

It is in this context that Olson reads Shem's character as both representative of the magical (Shamanistic, alchemical, etc.) as well as a manifest representation of the *principle* of transformation that structures the (dream)text. Like dream-meanings, the identities of characters and principles only stabilize in light of external concepts. Shem becomes the unstable embodiment of an historical and linguistic principle that can only be understood in the light of each particular interpretation. By showing how Shem/Hermes can be seen as an element of another Egyptian avatar, that of Thoth (embodied by HCE), as well as maintaining a parallel reading of a set of historical and linguistic principles for which these characters stand, Olson develops a holistic reading of the Greek and Egyptian references in the book. The implications of her reading stretch far outside this chapter, but her conclusion is that

The identities of Bruno, Hermes, Thoth, Shem, Shaun, and HCE all blend linguistically and as characters: "humble indivisibles in this grand continuum" [472]. This blending is possible because of the mutability inherent in language, which Joyce exploits by directly invoking Saussurean theories of linguistic circulation. (263)

In this reading, Shem comes to stand for both the Greek and the Egyptian Hermes, linking him to two very distinct practices of writing, as well as eventually subsuming him into the figure of his father. This reading, whereby characters are absorbed into each other under the aegis of their

“ruling” concepts, is not *necessarily* predicated on the dream-logic reading of the text as a whole, but that super-structure allows for a powerful set of guiding concepts that often illuminates the twists and turns of association. And while this is a somewhat superficial reproduction of Olson’s complex reading, it is worth noting that her reading of Shem, while certainly not *negating* any autobiographical reading (as this would be impossible for anyone reading the chapter), does not rely on the links between Shem and Joyce in any major way. Her version of Shem is also a metatextual commentary, but one that she advances without recourse to any of the many autobiographical components of the character.

Our final example of possible readings of Shem the Penman is Damon Franke’s 2000 article “In the ‘Numifeed Confusionary’: Reading the Negative Confession of ‘Finnegans Wake’.” While also explicitly indebted to John Bishop’s dream premise, as well as his *Book of the Dead* research, Franke’s interpretation goes in a very different direction than Olson’s. A central aspect of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the “Negative Confession,” involves a series of denials to various charges of transgression. Franke’s article outlines the appearance of the Negative Confession in the *Wake* in general and in Shem the Penman in particular, illustrating how, by combining aspects of the Catholic confession and the Egyptian Negative Confession, Joyce was able to craft a dual notion of confession suited to the relationship between Shem and Shaun and illustrative of properties of sleep and death thematically relevant to the “dreamer” as creator of the text. A turning point in the Shem chapter occurs in the first dialogue between the two brothers incarnated as JUSTIUS and MERCIUS when Shaun (as JUSTIUS), begins to interrogate his brother. After asking “where you have been in the uterim, enjoying yourself all the morning since your wetbed confession?” (187–188)¹⁷, Shaun says “Let us pry. We thought,

¹⁷ This is also reference to the opening of *Portrait of the Artist*, which dwells on bedwetting.

would and did. *Cur, quiquid, ubi, quando, quomodo, quoties, quibus auxiliis?*” (188). The Latin queries, as Bishop and Franke point out, are the queries (why, who, where, when, how, how often, with what assistance) that Catholic priests are taught to aid their taking of confession. The following questions, accusations and responses are not wholly influenced by Catholicism; however, as Franke explains that “[a]t a fundamental level in the relationship between Shem and Shaun, the *Wake* counterposes the desire of the Catholic confession for comprehensiveness with the syntax of denial outlined in the Negative Confession of the Book of the Dead” (57). Like Olson’s argument, Franke’s is more complex and wide-ranging than can be addressed here, but some of this central points are worth considering in light of the themes discussed so far, and in light of the question of where Joyce the writer lies in relation to Shem. For Franke, the juxtaposition of the Negative Confession with the Catholic confession allows for a reversal of the latter’s mode of interrogation, and its historical occurrences. As he explains:

[T]he Negative Confession works under the premise that an individual remains innocent until proven guilty while the Catholic confession operates under a moral code that finds humanity guilty until absolution re-achieves innocence and grace. The obvious appeal of the former inserts itself in *Finnegans Wake*, through denial contradiction, and obfuscation, and turns the reading and decipherment of the text into a challenge. The defiant stance of the *Wake* taunts the reader with the fall to try to prove it guilty. (69–70)

The analytical move whereby the *Wake*’s features are made to comment upon its own structure is not only typical for *Wake* studies, it is almost the rule. Franke’s reading, supported by the many references to the Negative Confession, as well as to the concurrent self-reference in the *Wake*, shows how Joyce’s text seems to always comment on itself, especially when it comes to themes of interrogation and confession. Franke works out some of the details of the relationship between Shaun and Shem based on this principle of opposing confessional modes, including some parallels with Bishop’s notion of the pair standing for the Ego and Id respectively, with “the

dynamics of the Shaun/Shem exchange [exemplifying] the first step toward worthily receiving the sacrament of Penance” (73). However, he also uses this dichotomy to investigate the *Wake* as a product of the type of self-writing that Shem’s self-tattooing represents.

The scene where Shem makes ink from his own urine and excrement is, among other things, a mock version of the Catholic ritual of transubstantiation. Franke explains that, after writing all over himself with this substance,

Shem’s appearance recalls the image of the mummy in the process of being preserved and prepared to enter the “nummified confessional.” With Shaun’s assistance, Shem confuses the confessional and conceals the substance “looking pretty black against” him by having paper/papyri clothe his rank, decomposing body. (78)

We can start to re-gather some of the thematic threads here, remembering the associations between darkness, artificiality, and otherness, as well as the links between Eastern culture and magic or alchemy, in this sustained meditation on the construction of Otherness. Most of the readings and themes presented here are cogent in the context of the book, but can appear wildly divergent without a close reading of their context. Franke’s article neatly brings the theme of writing and its artificiality back into the context of darkness and otherness, but leaves open the question of how Joyce himself fits into this portrayal of otherness. After all, many *Wake* researchers, including Franke, have no compunction with writing sentences that begin with the statement “The *Wake* is acutely conscious of its resistance to [...]” (68), so it should come as no surprise that the role of the text’s creator is not as simple as attributing to him its positions and outlooks. And neither can we, despite all the evidence, merely assume that Shem is an avatar or stand-in for Joyce, especially in light of the idea of the book-as-dream. In his introduction to Shem the Penman in his trail-breaking *A Readers Guide to Finnegans Wake*, William Tindall chastises Joyce for the lack of distance between himself and the character of Shem, writing that

“[t]he heavy—almost painful—jocularity with which Joyce handles Shem, no substitute for irony or comedy, fails to separate the embracing author from his embraced creation” (131). While there is much evidence to suggest this closeness, much of the subsequent work on the chapter has moved away from this perspective. As we move on to look at some of the way in which Joyce wrote himself into Shem, and what this could mean, it would be good to keep in mind a keen observation of David Hayman’s, who posited that *Finnegans Wake* “did not grow from autobiographical roots. Quite to the contrary, Joyce seems first to have located his archetypes and then to have discovered himself and his world in them” (*The Wake in Transit*, 167). This brings up some rather complex issues, even without the drafts and notes to guide our readings. If Shem does not embody a version of Joyce, but rather the opposite, it could follow that we can find versions of ourselves and others in the book, characters and archetypes to which we and our readings belong, and not the other way around. Moving through the biographical connections between Joyce and Shem, this should be kept in mind.

To the extent that Shem is a version of Joyce, the Shem the Penman chapter is a model for Joyce’s writing, and as Fordham points out, it “offers us a vision of the writer’s project” (39). In fact, many of the similarities between Joyce and Shem revolve around their writing habits and the very books they have written, as Shem tends to make “inartistic portraits of himself” (182), and is responsible for a “usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles” (92), as well as a work that is filled with “quashed quotatoes” (183) and “messes of montage” (183). These easily identifiable works are certainly Joyce’s, as are many of the methods of their creation, as Shaun asks “who can say how many pseudostylic shamiana, how few or how many of the most venerated public impostures, how very many piously forged palimpsest slipped in the first palace by this morbid process from his pelagiarist pen?” (181–182). But Shem does not only borrow

from literature, like Joyce he was eager to soak up (and note down) behaviour and utterances of those around him, as “All the time he kept on treasuring with condign satisfaction each and every crumb of trektalk, covetous of his neighbour’s word, and if ever, during a Munda conversazione commoted in the naton’s interest, delicate tippets were thrown out to him [...]” (172). Most affecting of all, however, is the long description of Shem’s cannibalistic (and auto-cannibalistic) tendency to turn all around him into material for literature:

Sniffer of carrion, premature gravedigger, seeker of the nest of evil in the bosom of a good word, you who sleep at our vigil and fast for our feast, you with your dislocated reason, have cutely foretold, a jopphet in your own absence, by blind poring upon your many scalds and burns and blisters, impetiginous sore and pustules, by the auspices of that raven cloud, your shade, and by the auguries of rooks in parlament, death with every disaster, the dynamitisation of colleagues, the reducing of records to ashes, the levelling of all customs by blazes, the return of a lot of sweettempered gunpowdered didst unto dudst but it never stphruck your mudhead’s obtundity (O hell, here comes our funeral! O pest, I’ll miss the post!) that the more carrots you chop, the more turnips you slit, the more murphies you peel, the more onions you cry over, the more bullbeef you butch, the more mutton you crackerhack, the more potherbs you pound, the fiercer the fire and the longer your spoon and the harder you gruel with more grease to your elbow the merrier fumes your new, stew. (189–190)

While we can see many of the above themes (the *Book of the Dead*, low taste, etc.) echoed here, the main thrust of the passage is clearly aimed at the archetypal writer who devours everything for the sake of art. Whether totally self-directed or merely a prior category into which he included himself, this passage is an excellent description not only of Joyce’s methods, but his entire maximalist approach to content in the *Wake*, and one which makes it obvious that, with all the other material he was including, he would be remiss not to add himself and his life into the pot. The passage also re-emphasizes the repeated links to forgery that define Shem, who Shaun memorably says “did but study with stolen fruit how cutely to copy all their various styles of signature so as one day to utter an epical forged cheque on the public for his own private profit” (181). The incorporation of other’s materials, and the view of art in general as forgery, is a major

theme linking Joyce's own creative process for the *Wake* to the character of Shem, as Vincent Cheng remarks in his *Shakespeare and Joyce: A Study of Finnegans Wake*:

After all, Shem-Joyce's literature, despite all its perverseness, is not even original; it is, rather, a set of plagiaristic fakeries, and he is a scavenger, a "sniffer of carrion, premature gravedigger" [189], feeding off the opuses of dead authors or off "any boskop of Yorek" [190]. Gravedigging recalls the gravedigger of *Hamlet*, present in this chapter as Shem the "premature gravedigger," who is nourished by his memories of any skull of Yorick. "Any boskop of Yorek" refers both to the ecclesiast (bishop?) Yorkick in *Tristram Shandy* and to the gravedigger in *Hamlet*, digging up the old skull of Yorick, the "tragic jester" [171] [...] (which also refers to Shem). According to *Webster's*, "Boskop man" (named after a locale in the Transvaal, like Peking or Piltdown Man) was "a late Pleistocene southern African man, [...] ancestral to modern Bushmen and Hottentots." In German, *Böse* means "devil" or "fiend," and *Kopf* means "head." "Boskop," then, can represent either a prehistoric skull or an ancestor; it is likely that "boskop of Yorek" means skull of Yorick and ancestors (or devils) of York. Thus Shem-Hamel is being accused of gravedigging from and cannibalizing the materials of dead authors. (93)

Cheng's book is a full length study of the presence of only one of these dead authors in the *Wake*, and, despite Shakespeare's prominence, there are many such authors with such pervasive presence. While it is clear that these types of passages and themes are meant to describe the book itself, they also describe the practice of a writer whose previous two novels contained more or less direct self-portraits. Bernard Benstock, in his *Joyce-again's Wake*, focuses on Shem as an avatar, not of Joyce directly, but of Joyce as Stephen from *Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*. Pointing out how the *Wake* "actually recapitulates the autobiographical events of the *Portrait* and its successor" (115). Benstock gives many examples of this recapitulation outside the Shem chapter, before providing a rundown of a list of correspondences mostly located there:

Like Stephen, Shem declares his *non serviam*: "Do you hold yourself then for some god in the manger, Shehohem, that you will neither serve nor let serve, pray nor let pray? [188]; he is a tenor: "he squealed the topsquall [...]" [180]; he acknowledges his heritage from the Greeks and Hebrews—"that greekenhearted yude!"—and announces his exile from Ireland where he felt he was dying: "he would not throw himself in Liffey...he refused to saffrocake himself with a sod".

[172]¹⁸

While it could be persuasively argued that most of these correspondences apply to Joyce as well as to Stephen, for Benstock, this is taking too simple a view. Benstock also reads in the *Wake*, and in Joyce's writings in general, a consistent defense of the ability of the artist to be objective in their portrayals of life:

Joyce insists upon the necessary objectivity which permits an author to see life as the panorama around him and outside of himself, as well as the three-dimensional mirror in which he must view his juxtaposition to the panorama with equal objectivity. This allows Joyce to write a parody of himself and his artistic process with a detachment that is twice-removed. Joyce is Stephen Dedalus is Shem: Shem's is a caricature of Stephen who is an exaggerated self-portrait of the young Joyce. (121)

As Ingeborg Landuyt points out in her genetic reading of the chapter, however, Stephen is not the only character Joyce associated with Shem, as he added associations to Leopold Bloom, as well as many that were unmistakably to himself outside of any literary depiction (145). Many of the examples of self-reference, however, were still literary, and many of them were directly taken from criticism of *Ulysses*. Landuyt shows how negative (and, rarely, positive) comments on *Ulysses* from sources ranging from Virginia Woolf to the psychologist Dr. Joseph Collins were systematically noted down and integrated into the Shem chapter, attributing to Shem many of the negative remarks about *Ulysses* and Joyce as a writer (144–153). A pseudonymous review of *Ulysses* by someone going by the name “Aramis” was especially influential, and he filled an entire notebook page with this and other reviews which he used to fill out the description of Shem (146). Landuyt's article and Fordham's chapter on Shem represent the two most complete genetic readings of the chapter, and their conclusions cohere remarkably well. Landuyt writes

¹⁸ The saffron cake/suffocate portmanteau here is also directly evocative of the Saffron cakes in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which, glossed by Ronald McHugh, stand for Osiris and Heaven and Earth (172).

that

The result of Joyce's accumulations is a quite recognizable description and condemnation of his person and his methods as seen through the eyes of his critics that simultaneously should be read as his defence. One of the aspects of *Finnegans Wake* as a whole is indeed that it contained Joyce's answers to all attacks. [The Shem chapter] is among the most obvious expressions of this concern, and most of the data that Joyce used were derived from his own life and writings and from the reactions they generated, complemented with elements from a wide range of negative prototypes for his antihero, the "still today insufficiently malestimated notesnatcher" [125] Shem the Penman. (159)

Likewise, Fordham concludes his chapter by remarking that "[t]his chapter becomes a means for Joyce to objectify that harsh criticism which hoped to prevent Joyce from moving on from *Ulysses*" (65). The chapter also served, however, to historicize and contextualize Joyce's self-portraits, and Margot Norris describes the chapter's autobiographical approach as a revisiting of "the problematic of artistic autonomy through the trope of self-reflexivity and self-portraiture in whose name he stepped into modernism with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (*Joyce's Web*, 68). That much of this revisit is characterized by harsh criticism and brutal characterization speaks less to some self-loathing on Joyce's part than a complex riff on themes of criticism, self-portraiture, and the historicizing of the self. The objectification of criticism that Fordham points out is also a recontextualization of it. If we recall David Hayman's assertion that "Joyce seems first to have located his archetypes and then to have discovered himself and his world in them," it also follows that he is placing his world within the almost cosmically large historical context of his novel (167). He is not only objectifying his critiques, he is locating them within a repetitive history of similar conflicts and sublimating them into a stream of history deep enough to hide their shallowness and meaninglessness. But, as Fordham asks, "Why should this sham copywriter, this forger, know anything about something as huge and unencompassable as universal history?" (45).

While the relationship between Shem and Joyce is clearly complex, it also clearly not resolvable in any direct way. Shem contains Joyce as much as Joyce contains Shem, and the structure of the book often evokes a sense of this impossible Matryoshka doll model of self-containment. The massive breadth of reference and the minute details of the text seem to incorporate so much of the world that, as we shall see in the course of the chapter, many critics feel that whatever they have to say has already been said by the book itself. The tendency to self-reference, especially prevalent in the Shem chapter, is a major key to understanding the work, however, and the auto-cannibalization and “forgeries” implied by Shem’s behaviour provide insight mirrored by studies into Joyce’s process.

The final section of Finn Fordham’s reading of Shem the Penman is a tour-de-force analysis revolving around three sentences in the middle of the chapter which read “This exists that isits after having been said we know. And dabal take dabnal! And the dal dabal dab aldanabal!” (186).¹⁹ As Fordham points out, this is “a paradigm of incomprehensibility” (61). Despite this apparent incomprehensibility, Fordham manages to spin these two sentences out into two of his most revealing commentaries on the *Wake*, showing how the sources (both Latin and obsolete English) for “exist” and “insist” suggest a dialectic between a “standing out” of being, and a “leaning” of being (insist means to lean upon on an obsolete form) (62). Suggesting that this line is part of “an obscure investigation on Joyce’s part of the nature of being” which was “coincidentally [...] occurring simultaneously in the writings of Heidegger,” Fordham writes:

This neologism “isists” (or isits as it became) might suggest that we have underestimated the totality and nature of Being: that in terms of being existence is only half the story and what we need is an opposite which is not *non*-existence but is *insistence*. And what exists (what *is*), both exists (stands out) and also isists (leans on). *Finnegans Wake* exists (it stands out as being), but it also “isists” (leans into being). (62)

¹⁹ I have transcribed this as it appears in the final copy of the *Wake*, but Fordham also works from the third galley (the copy where Joyce added this line), where “isits” reads as “isists”.

Although Fordham is aware that this might seem an unwarranted extrapolation from such a small line, his reading is based on the type of linguistic readings the book teaches one to perform, and, he observes, part of the attraction to the book as that its “riddling language [...] pushes us towards new concepts” (62). This concept is also confirmed by the biographical detail of Joyce’s readings of *Les Langues du Monde* by Antoine Meillet and Marcel Cohen, and his notes on Dravidian languages. In Dravidian, as Joyce noted, the phrase “after having been said” is a common absolutive used in place of the pronoun “that” in contexts like the above quote. If we reverse the transliteration the sentence is rendered as “This exists that isits—that we know” confirming, or at least solidifying, Fordham’s reading. He comments that “Joyce’s code may have become highly obscure, but at least tenacious readers, contributing to each other, may track down some of the tricks at play in the meaning” (63). It is important to note that this reading was predicated on an analytic methodology very much learned from its subject. The breaking down of words into constituent parts, the tracing of multiple languages, and the reliance on biographical material and the author’s notes (genetic readings) are all *a posteriori* strategies dictated by the particularities of the text.

The final passage Fordham analyzes is one of the more interesting moments in the *Wake* in terms of teaching its readers how to read. “And dabal take dabnal! And the dal dabal dabaldanabal!” is immediately followed by “So perhaps, agglaggagglomeratively asaspensing [...]”, giving us some clues as to the message of the sentence (186). The combination of agglutinative and conglomerate suggest features of languages, and as Fordham (and others before him) point out, the language contained in the previous two exclamations turns out to be Santali (or Santal), an agglutinative language from the north of India, part of the “Munda” languages referenced above (“during a Munda conversazione” (172)). An interesting feature of Santali is its use of

infixes, parts of speech added to the middle of words to alter their meaning.²⁰ As Ford explains:

[i]n Santali, “Dal” means “to hit”. With the fix “ap” it doubles and comes to mean “to hit each other”. Then the added infix “n” turns the verb into a noun, “Dapnal”. So “to hit each other” comes to mean a “combat”. The last word of this phrase, is “danapal” meaning “finally covering up” as if covering up every last scrap, as Joyce approaches the time of completion and closure.

The exclamation “And dabal take dabnal! And the dal dabal dabaldanabal!”, is a linguistic pile-up of infixes like the insertion of punches in a fight. It can be roughly translated from Santali, as “hit each other fight! fight hit each other, hit each other, finally covering!” It is if the writing, now nearing completion, has been like the relationship between Shem and Shaun, a fight with itself [...]. (63–64)

Fordham’s reading is a superb example of how the *Wake* is always speaking of its own creation, and how Joyce’s methods for creating the text were determined in the course of its creation, not established *a priori*—just as the models and tactics for analyzing the *Wake* are found in its pages. As Fordham explains from a genetic perspective, the infixing of the Santali language can be taken as instructive for how “Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake*, tacking things on between bits of writing he’d already made [writing with] a series of infixes, insertions into words, phrases, sentences, sections, whole chapters and parts” (64). Fordham’s reading of this sentence is also a reminder, however, of the insistent polyvalence of any *Wake* sentence. While his reading of the final “dapanal” in the sentence as a sort of metatextual commentary of Joyce’s final “covering up” of the last stages of his draft, that reading pulls it out of the context of the chapter. *Dapanal*, in Santali, does not refer to just any “final covering up,” it actually means “Three pieces of wood placed above a corpse on the funeral pile to keep it in position; a covering” (Campbell, *Santali-English Dictionary*, 1899, 120). Not only does the specificity of this “covering” add a rather different sort of finality to the fraternal feuding, it feeds directly into the Egyptian funereal themes of the rest of the chapter. Even though this was indeed, as Fordham observed, a very late

²⁰ Fordham notes that there are almost no European language examples of this outside of exclamations like “abso-bllomin’-lutely” and its many more profane variants, although players of the game “superduperghost” would understand the principle immediately (63).

addition to the text, its provenance is not solely metatextual; Joyce is still keeping the interlaced themes of the chapter present in as many of the words and sentences as possible. Fordham's reading is still an excellent one, however, as are his assertions that this process of "infixing" which he used "more and more towards the end of the writing" was important for the composition of the book (64). The process of creating the words of the *Wake*, of breaking down words and phrases into the smallest constituent parts possible (often down to the level of morphemes, as in the Santali and "isists" examples), and then recombining them with other words and languages is merely part of the process of creating the *Wake*. The macrocosmic themes of Being and existence, brotherly strife, and funereal rites established through these linguistic experiments are also only part of the whole. Joyce's process of creation necessarily involved the constant movement from minutiae to universals, just as the book itself moves in theme from the small to the large, and the critics and readers who approach it seriously will find themselves buffeted by the constant differential between the microcosmic at the level of language, and the macrocosmic on the level of theme. This chapter will explore a model for looking at that differential, as well as some of the ways in which it has been critically received.

Heuristics and Summaries

Having provided a brief portrait of what it is like to engage with the text of *Finnegans Wake*, we can turn to some of the key concepts related to my thesis. My general assertion for this chapter is that *Finnegans Wake* is an exemplary late modernist work characterized by an exploration of the micro- and macro-limits of expression and comprehension in its medium, and that the Kantian concept of the mathematical sublime is a useful heuristic for understanding this characteristic of the work as well as the ways in which it has been received. Investigating the *Wake* in light of this

thesis mostly involves questions regarding the *complexity* of the work. While the above example hopefully imparted some sense of this, there are many ways of understanding how *Finnegans Wake* is complex and in order to get to a place where this question can be properly asked, however, it is important to first outline some of the general types of complexity associated with the book, and create some models for thinking about them. I will first create some “naïve” conceptions of the complexity of the work, its creation, and its reception before moving on to more detailed versions of the same.

The Work (Description)

The text of *Finnegans Wake* can be considered complex in many different ways, beginning with the language in which it is written—an argot or idiom glossia composed of portmanteau words culled from diverse languages with the effect of magnifying the polysemic potential of language. We can also speak of its complexity in terms of its overarching themes of historical circularity and the interrelatedness of cultures, often framed through the lens of Giambattista Vico’s theory of the cyclical ages of man. This framework allows Joyce to revisit diverse moments in history through reference to the language in which they were first recorded, a technique multiplying the complexity of the language but allowing him to maintain a stronger link to the concreteness of the original event. On the level of its characters, the *Wake*’s complexity comes from the protean nature of its small cast of xenolalic Dubliners, locked in a repetitious recitation of their family woes across the stage of world history. Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (HCE), Anna Livia Plurabelle (ALP), and their children, Shem, Shaun, and Issy, are the major characters of the book, but they manifest under various different signs and guises both synecdochic and recombinant, standing as both avatars and prototypes for various familial scenes throughout

history and literature.

Reception (Description)

Readerly response to the complexity of *Finnegans Wake* presumes a readership, and despite the current listing of twenty-nine reading groups at FinnegansWake.org (accessed November 5, 2014), the more typical response is that of sometime-Joycean Umberto Eco, who asked in a Guardian interview: “Who has really read all of *Finnegans Wake*?” (Eco, “I’m a Writer not a Reader”). This response, coming from a man who has published on it repeatedly, is notable in that it effectively transforms the text into an object lesson or flat signifier for the idea of (usually quixotic) complexity. On the other hand, for the *Finnegans Wake* community—by which I mean not only professional scholars dedicated to the text, but the many lay-Joyceans who form *Finnegans Wake* reading groups and the like—the book is not only readable and read, but often reread and treasured as a lifetime-book, with which one can grow old and return to again and again. There appears to be, then, an unusually strong differentiation between critical reception of the text and its image in the minds of its popular readership. Part of this discrepancy has to do with what is required of its readers in terms of the content of the text (all those factors mentioned above), and partly to do with the status of the book in culture. Speaking in a general way, we can say that the major problematic regarding responses to the book’s complexity is that of the *anxiety* of the reader, towards the interpretation problems the book presents or in the face of the book’s cultural status as quixotic object.

Creation (Description)

All of James Joyce's books are renowned for their increasingly intense textual excesses, and he is a standard point of reference for the fullness of the literary mind. Most markedly, textual exegeses of his work have, from the publication of *Ulysses* until far past his death, relied on his own pronouncements and notes regarding his texts. Joyce's power over his critics and readers, not merely as a presence or intention manifest through his prose but as a personal spectre of meaning, rivals almost any author in history for the simple reason that he was more than willing to not only personally hint at explanations, but leave the entirety of his written creative process available for posterity. One effect of this is the dissolution of the boundaries between reader and writer, casting the critics and readers in Joyce's own role, allowing them to seemingly participate synoptically in the creation of the works and, conversely, allowing Joyce to seem as much a reader and critic of his own work as an author. The standard Ellman biography of Joyce, the six-thousand some pages of extant notes for *Finnegans Wake*, and the many surviving letters from the period of its creation are, of course secondary to the work itself, but hardly count as ephemera as they are in many ways vital to the interpretation of the work. The complexity associated with the creation of *Finnegans Wake* paradoxically rests not on the obscurity of its creation, but its prominence.

Further Distinctions

These distinctions are useful not only for thinking about the work as an abstract received entity, but also in terms of the concrete way in which critics engage with it. Each of these categories could easily be assigned a critical school focusing on that particular aspect of the work: for instance, formal/linguistic for "the work"; reader response for "reception"; and genetic criticism for "creation." Before moving on to critical responses, however, I would like to conceptualize

these categories in a different manner, one which will direct the focus more specifically to notions of complexity and interpretability in each of the above divisions. Borrowing (unfaithfully) a concept from Deleuze, I am going to reconsider each of the above categories in terms of “planes of complexity.” My intent with the use of this term is to establish which types of complexity are immanent to each of the above categories, and by doing so establish a more rigorous division between the figures and formal relations that make up this complexity. This is helpful for thinking about the categories of interpretation more abstractly, but also for creating a conceptualization of the interpretive categories that relates strongly to *Finnegans Wake* as well as to the interpretive methodologies of the Kantian sublime and phenomenology that I have outlined in the previous chapters.

The first plane of complexity is immanent to the work itself, relating to its systems of signification and the internal relations between these systems. This plane is characterized by the differential between extreme fragmentation (specificity of paradigmatic selection, unparalleled lexemic inventiveness), and extreme universality (openness of syntagmatic association, cohesion of thematic, and breadth of cultural reference). The second plane of complexity is immanent to the reading subject, relating to the anxiety encountered by subjects approaching the text or attempting to relate to it or relate its contents to others. This plane is characterized by the differential between complete openness of interpretation (“infinite semiosis”) and complete opacity of readability (the “unknowable work”). The third plane of complexity is immanent to the creating subject, relating to the creative process of conceptualization and ideation as well as the concrete work of writing and revising the words that make up the text. This plane is characterized by the differential between its absolute interiority and therefore resistance to access (we cannot know the mind of Joyce) and the proliferation of exterior significations of its

processes (the copious notes, drafts, interviews, and letters available to us). With these distinctions in mind, we can reconfigure or restate categories of the work, its reception, and its creation with a stronger link to the established themes of this dissertation.

The Work (Plane of Complexity)

The plane of complexity immanent to the work itself presents limits or horizons of interpretability in terms of the micro-world of linguistic meanings that occur on the surface or syntagmatic level of the text and their relation to the paradigmatic meanings that accrue in the course of the macro-world of the book as a whole. The cliché whereby “there is more in one page of *Finnegans Wake* than the whole book” illustrates the type of complexity proper to the immanent plane: a fractal proliferation of meaning whose only limits are the horizon of the visible magnified portion. The criticism which addresses this plane of complexity for *Finnegans Wake* includes linguistic analysis, formal structural criticism, most “page by page” type readings and all *Finnegans Wake* dictionaries. In the context of this dissertation we can think of this plane in terms of the Kantian mathematical sublime and its related concepts: magnitudes, the infinite, small and large units of meaning, and the differential between form and formlessness.

Reception (Plane of Complexity)

The plane of complexity immanent to the reading subject presents limits or horizons of interpretability in terms of the construction of meaning particular to either reception of texts in general or the particular difficulties presented by the *Wake*'s features *as they appear in a reading subject's consciousness*. The question of how one can approach the book, the anxieties of the reader, the impossibility of certainty in the interpretation of any concept or phrase in the book,

and the personal knowledge required to read the book are all related to this plane of complexity. The cliché of “an ideal reader with an ideal insomnia” illustrates this type of approach to the complexity of the book: the horizon of possible knowledge and comprehension of a reading subject. Critical works addressing this plane of complexity include most introductions to the work, Jungian readings, treatments of the experience of reading the book, and most meta-critical works or critical surveys. In the context of this dissertation we can think of this plane in terms of phenomenology, particularly the concepts of facticity, anxiety, and worlds.

Creation (Plane of Complexity)

The plane of complexity immanent to the creating subject presents limits or horizons of interpretability in terms of the limits of knowledge of another subject’s intentions and creative processes. The question of the “death” or presence of the author, the foregrounding of biographical details in literary interpretation and the “becoming” of the book versus its final “being” are all related to this plane of complexity. The cliché whereby Joyce created the *Wake* as a joke or merely as a puzzle for professors illustrates this type of approach to the complexity of the book: the impossible horizon of the creative other. Critical works addressing this plane of complexity include all biographical readings, and, most notably, the superb body of work produced by the intrepid genetic scholars of the *Wake*. In the context of this dissertation we can think of the very *existence* of this plane as the motivating factor for interpretive models, as hermeneutics only arises in the absence of explanation.

Complexity and Hermeneutics

The need for hermeneutics, and for interpretive models, arises at the intersection between these three planes. A text in need of hermeneutic interpretation is one which requires some degree of explication due to the proliferation of meanings in the mind of the reading subject, in the plane of complexity immanent to the reading subject. This proliferation of meanings is usually, but not always, caused by some feature immanent to the text itself, and generated by the creating subject. We can think of situations in which the proliferation of meanings in the mind of a reading subject is activated by a relatively simple text's difficult context or historical location (an "Exit" sign in an abandoned fallout shelter) or by some special status of the creative subject (an otherwise unremarkable painting attributed to Hitler), but the three planes are clearly co-extensive. While the distinction provides a useful division for the types of complexity one must address when speaking of difficult texts, textual complexity itself, just like textual meaning, cannot reside purely in the qualities of the textual object, the subject's response to these qualities, or the originator of these qualities, but *between* the three planes. It is generally those features generated between the planes which require a turn to hermeneutics or to some interpretive model of literary theory. One hermeneutic strategy readily available to *Wake* scholars is recourse to Joyce's notes and drafts, along with the host of readily available biographical details of the author's life. This strategy illustrates how we can link the third plane most strongly to the notion of hermeneutics. Commenting on this plane of complexity and the interpretive strategy it requires in his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (providing a gloss to Spinoza) writes:

Historical interpretation "in the spirit of the writer" is necessary [...] because of the hieroglyphic and incomprehensible nature of the contents. In interpreting Euclid, says Spinoza, no one pays any heed to the life, studies and habits (*vita, studium et mores*) of that author, and this is true also for the spirit of the Bible in moral matters (*circa documenta moralia*). Only because there are incomprehensible things (*res imperceptibiles*) in the stories of the Bible does our understanding of them depend on being able to derive the author's meaning from the whole of his work (*ut mentem auctoris percipiamus*). And here, in fact, it does

not matter whether what is meant corresponds to our insight since we want to know only the meaning of the statements (*sensus orationum*) but not their truth (*veritas*). For this we need to exclude all prepossessions, even those of reason (and, of course, especially those generated by our prejudices). Thus the “naturalness” of the understanding of Scripture depends on the fact that what makes sense can be understood at sight, and what does not can be understood “historically.” The breakdown of the immediate understanding of things in their truth is the motive for the detour into history. (181–182)

There are several phenomenological echoes that one should hear in Spinoza, not least of which is the need for excluding (or bracketing) prepossessions, and the “naturalness” of a certain attitude of understanding. What Spinoza is arguing here, and what Gadamer wants us to understand in terms of phenomenology, is that hermeneutics proper is only needed when the meaning of a text is not apparent, and this is when one needs to investigate the life of the author in order to make sense of their statements. When we think of the process of investigating the life of an author, however, we need not immediately think of the type of biographical readings that are usually viewed as suspect within the literary community. What Spinoza writes, and Gadamer highlights, is the need to know the “*mores*” of an author. We can hear an echo here of the Greek ‘*ἔθος*,’ or habit, and its world-disclosing effects. We need hermeneutics to bring us closer to the world disclosed by an author’s particular *ἔθος* or *mores*, to let us understand a world different from ours. *Finnegans Wake* is clearly closer to the Bible than to Euclid in terms of *res imperceptibiles*, but what makes the *Wake* especially difficult to interpret is that the type of interpretation it demands is difficult along a couple of axes in both planes of complexity.

If we take Euclid’s *Elements* as an example of a work not needing an investigation into the life or intentions of the author, does this mean that it is a simple work to interpret? Of course not—its difficulty is merely on the order of the concatenations of meaning instead of proliferations. When we read the *Elements*, there is still an intensification of thought on what we have been calling the plane of complexity immanent to the subject: we must gather possible

meanings and organize them in relation to what we know, but most of the work is in what we could call a vertical rather than horizontal intensification. We open Euclid's *Elements* and read: "Σημεόν ἐστιν, οὃ μέρος οὐθέν" ("A point is that of which there is no part") as the first of twenty-three definitions preceding his famous five postulates: (1) The primary interpretive activity here is the *linking* together of a series of statements whose meaning, despite our chronological distance, remains clear. While there might be some possible proliferation of possible meaning of, say the word μέρος (mereology comes to mind), we don't need to imagine Euclid's era, or his *vita, studium et mores* in order to understand that the word means "part" in a way familiar to us today. The difficulty presented by the *Elements* is that of holding his definitions and axioms in our mind as we progress through the text: vertical concatenations of meaning as opposed to horizontal proliferation of meaning on the plane of complexity immanent to the reading subject. Our ability to follow these concatenations of meaning depends on features of the plane of complexity immanent to the text itself: its organizational principles, language, and the famously clear diagrams accompanying his text. To better understand how the vertical and horizontal axes of meaning work, let's take an example whose complexity functions in a different manner.

Sticking with Greek, let's consider this fragment of Sappho's: "Ὀπτιασ ἄμμε," "you burn us." This fragment survived through Apollonius, who quotes it to demonstrate the Aeolian (or epic) form of ημᾶς (us). No matter how seductive in its elision, this fragment remains an unknowable moment from a remote and all but lost world, the mysteries of which no critical stance will explain more fully than any other, and yet it retains a degree of complexity in the subjective plane of immanence. We read these two words and, depending on our knowledge of Sappho's poetry or her life or merely our imaginative state at that moment, a multitude of

meanings or contexts can proliferate from the fragment. We can imagine the different senses of the word “Ὀπτιασ’”, for example, and the different poetic contexts this fragment could have been placed into. The root form of “Ὀπτα” can be used to speak of baking pottery or roasting meat, of the metaphoric burning of love, or of a hardening through exposure to the sun (Liddell & Scott, 494). Each of these suggests a range of poetic uses creating an intensity of meaning in our imaginations, a proliferation of possibilities along a horizontal plane, with no vertical plane or textual context in which to place them. There is almost no concatenation of meaning here, but a great deal of potential for proliferation—the horizontal over the vertical. Again, these effects occur in the plane of complexity immanent to a reading subject, but directly related to the plane immanent to the text, to the particularities of that textual fragment. Texts on this end of the interpretive continuum are marked by fragmentation and incompleteness, chronological distance (either literal or figurative) and an openness of possible interpretive frameworks. On the end of the continuum occupied by Euclid, the textual characteristics include completeness or universality, chronological closeness (again literal or figurative) and a closed or restricted interpretive framework. What makes *Finnegans Wake* so interesting is that it is complex in *both* directions. Within the plane of complexity immanent to the reading subject, meanings accrue in horizontal and vertical directions: any individual word in the *Wake* opens up a horizontal field of possibilities, a proliferation of meaning guaranteed by its multilingual base and its constant neologizing. But in order to understand the book as a whole, one must link the individual words and pages together, and attempt a global view. We must follow its concepts and words and characters from page to page and create a vertical concatenation of meanings in order to view the superstructure of the text as a whole. It will be helpful here to bring back some of the vocabulary of the mathematical sublime, as these “directions” of complexity, and the *differential* between

them suggest a sort of “vibration” in the reading subject. Undifferentiated openness of interpretive possibilities alone cannot suggest any sort of sublime relation to the infinite, “Ὅπτιος ἄμμε” is beautiful in its elusiveness, and its horizon of interpretations and associations appears, in fact, to contain more possibilities than the same line deployed in context. However, these associations must remain merely that, they cannot be understood in terms of hermeneutic possibilities, and we cannot gain insight into a structure or concatenation of meanings from them. What the structure of the mathematical sublime suggests in terms of the “unreadability” of texts is that we need, first, some sort of unit of measurement with which to comprehend the vastness of the textual possibilities, but also that we construct a universe corresponding to this unit (a text) in which to deploy our comparison. The fragment of Sappho’s may be possessed of some of the formlessness associated with objects evoking the sublime, but there is no potential for our reason to grasp it in any total sense; it must remain unknowable and opaque. Conversely, the joy of reading Euclid lies in the supersensible apprehension of the cumulative totality of his theorems and proofs: the understanding of geometric concepts his work conveys. But there is no “triumph” or ascension of reason in this case, as while there is certainly a challenge to the interpretive faculties, there is no real need for a hermeneutics in the sense of insight into the particularities of its creation. Much more importantly there is none of the “formlessness” associated with the sublime, even if we encounter difficulty in interpreting Euclid, it is not due to a proliferation of possible interpretations of the words as there would be in a fragment of Sappho’s. Both of these works, of course, merely lie on a *continuum* of interpretability, and no statement as to their readability can be absolute. But they do illustrate that if we apply our model of the mathematical sublime to a textual object, its status as an interpretable object must suggest both opacity *and* the possibility of comprehension. This is one of the links between the sublime and the concept of

facticity and the hermeneutic circle: an object capable of evoking the sublime, despite the conceptual link to its “formlessness,” must in fact be both disclosed and *disclosing* of the world of the subject-to-sublimity. In order for the subject to undergo the immanent flux between overwhelmed sensibility and the ascension of reason, the object must be an interpretable one, appearing within a *disclosed* world and, through its evocation of the sublime, able to *disclose* a particular sense of itself *and the subject-to-sublimity*. This last point is key, as it suggests a strong link between Heidegger’s *angst* as world-disclosing and Kant’s pleasure/displeasure differential as disclosing of reason. Both are “limit” experiences that disclose aspects of ourselves and the world to us in particular ways and both can be linked to the experience of art objects with minimal philosophical unfaithfulness. *Finnegans Wake* suggests itself as a potential object for the evocation of the sublime not through the *impossibility* of comprehending it, but because it is clearly *possible* to interpret, but this possibility lies at the far end of the horizon. The way in which this possibility (and the attendant ascension of the supersensible over the sensible) presents itself can also be thought of in light of the three planes of immanence. The possibility of reading the *Wake*, of understanding it, can be imagined in terms of the coherence of the internal logic of the text, in terms of the coherence of an assembled reading outside of the text, or in terms of Joyce’s plan for the text and methods of assembling it. These are all ways of returning finitude to a seemingly infinite work, but they should not lessen the impact of the book’s complexity or its ability to impart intimations of infinity. Further on I will discuss how many of the best critical works on the *Wake* serve to *restore* the work’s intimations of the infinite, but for now I will summarize my thesis in light of some of the concepts above:

We can think of the complexity of *Finnegans Wake* in terms of its immanent structure: a structure whose tendency towards fragmentation and universality, microstructures and

macrostructures, links it to the concept of the mathematical sublime. We can also think of the complexity of *Finnegans Wake* in terms of its effect on reading subjects, the anxiety induced by the simultaneous openness and reticence of the text as interpretable object, linking it to questions of facticity and anxiety as world-disclosing. The link between these two views is the possibility that the displeasure/pleasure “vibration” or fluctuation evoked in a subject by the mathematical sublime is the very anxiety that discloses the world of the text to its reading subject in a particular “factual” manner. Before elaborating further in the context of the *Wake*, I would like to introduce a concept of Edward Casey’s specifically relating the question of facticity to the world of art. Although not explicitly relating to the sublime, I believe Casey’s concept of the “edge” provides an excellent link between the concepts of facticity and the sublime.

Edges: Facticity, Sublimity, and Anxiety

Collected in the François Raffoul and Eric Nelson edited *Rethinking Facticity*, Edward Casey’s essay “Keeping Art to its Edge” opens with the claim that

By the time we designate something as “art,” it has lost its disruptive presence, its radical novelty, its challenge to our usual modes of classification, starting with those that belong to what we call “aesthetics,” that is, the codification of primary directions of art in the last historical epoch. It has lost its edge. [...] “Edge” disestablishes and upsets by its very structure: a structure whose effect is to obscure what is coming and to come—the sudden, the surprising, the new. (273)

Casey’s concept of an edge is related, then, to the notion of the avant-garde, to art as disruptive force opening up new horizons of possibility, but it is also, as Casey goes on to elaborate, a limit itself. For him the edge is the factual image par excellence, serving as a grounds and a limit: both delineating the grounds of the artwork, as in a frame, and serving as the opening of the artwork to its surroundings and its viewing subjects. Casey explores this dual role of the edge in a variety of contexts and with varied terminology, but two of his most important pairs of

concepts are those of the border versus the boundary and intensification versus amplification. He illustrates both of these pairs in relation to Robert Smithson's famous earthwork "Spiral Jetty" (1969–70), a work he considers "exemplary of creative edgework" (278).

For Casey, the terms "border" and "boundary" are different conceptualizations of edges in art. A border is a limiting, inscribing edge, marking the limits of a work, its proper domain and location. A boundary is an opening edge, marking the viewer's access to the work, and its relationship to the world around it. For Spiral Jetty:

The shore is normally and naturally a border in the circumstance—it is the common limit of the land and the water, and retains a steady presence throughout—but the Jetty transforms it into a boundary: a band that acts as source and orientation for the earthwork that protrudes from it so audaciously. And the work itself acts as boundary for the shore: at once its elaboration and its outermost limit. At the same time, the edge of the Jetty acts as a boundary in relation to the salty water that invades it, submerges it, and by now has finally coated it with salt. The Spiral Jetty is a boundary for a border that becomes in turn a boundary of its own [...]. (278)

This is a fairly dense description of an incredibly unique artwork, but we can easily read the themes of facticity that Casey is building here. An artwork, particularly one as "embedded" in the world as Spiral Jetty, has a factual relation to its surroundings, or the world in general, that can be described in terms of its edges. The edge between the world and the work is a "border" in the sense that what makes a work a whole, cohesive, and distinct entity is its separation from the world (for example, a text's separation from the world of other texts in the case of literature). On the other hand what allows us an "in," so to speak, a way to interpret this work, is the fact that the edge of the work must also be a "boundary," an interface with the world of which it is a part (for example, a text's common language and references with the world of other texts). This is another way of talking about the hermeneutic circle, and the dual interpreting and interpreted nature of the factual world—the question of how a work exists in the world as "thrown" and

participates in the “thrownness” of its viewing/reading subjects. Before dealing with the question of how a the notion of “edge” could be applied to literature, it will be helpful to look at Casey’s other pair of terms related to “edge.”

If we think of the terms boundary/border as relating to the interface between the plane immanent to the work and that immanent to the receptive subject, Casey’s other terms, “intensification” and “amplification,” relate to the interface between all three planes:

The action of the edge in art is that of *intensification* and *amplification*; in the first case, the energies of the artist (and those of the admirer of his or her work) are gathered within the edges of the work itself, concentrating themselves there, while coalescing with the material media of which the work is composed; in the second case, a certain transcendent intentionality is evident as the work, once invested with the intense energies of creation, gestures beyond itself into its own periphery. We see both of these directionalities at work in the Jetty itself, whose spiral structure at once draws our perception or motion *into it* [...] while simultaneously sending our look or step out beyond it into the surrounding Salt Lake or above, into the sun and sky [...] It is as if the intensification of the inward-moving spiral is such that it demands augmentation in the form of transcending its own boundaries. (279)

Casey’s language coincides neatly with Deleuze, making it easy to see the link to the “planes of immanent complexity.” An “edge” is that aspect of a plane whose intensification creates isomorphic intensities on the other planes: A painter focuses on a detail, pours concentration and an intensification of imagination and physical attention into a spot on a canvas where, under the brush, knife, or scraper, the paint gathers in complexity of color and texture, drawing our attention as viewers, bringing our minds to sharp focus. A vertical concatenation of meaning orients around an “edge,” linking the three planes in an intensification of meaning while simultaneously opening the work up to its possibilities of meaning. The detail draws us in and opens the work up to the horizontal movements of eyes, thoughts, and associations that will follow the artist across the canvas and outward beyond the frame.

These intensifications (gathering together) and amplifications (expanding outward) are

images of what Casey calls the “powerful bidirectionality” of the edge, a bidirectionality that should always be understood as having a temporal aspect. An artwork is said to be “edgy” or to “set us on edge” if it induces anxiety, makes its viewers uncomfortable, and much of that discomfort has to do with the isolating and isolated aspect of an avant-garde work. Casey writes that:

To break out of the bonds of previous styles, artists must break through encrustations of belief and history and practice. This is the perpetual struggle of the avant-garde: undermining accepted edges of the *cognoscenti*, “those in the know,” so as to reach toward new edges never before realized or even recognized. The tried edges of what is all too well known give way to the evolving edges of what-is-to-come: the Event. Every coming event comes with double edges: those of the retained shadows of the remembered and those of the portended and about-to-happen. (274)

Here we can see the phenomenological themes of both Husserl and Heidegger tied to the concept of the avant-garde. The role of “edgy” avant-garde art can be understood as a disrupting force in two senses. We can think the “edge” of art in a more Husserlian sense of embodying the anticipatory element of temporal intention (we can replace portending with protending to make the link more explicit), showing how an artwork’s temporal unfolding can carry with it an element of the unknown when its presence disrupts our anticipations. We can also think of the edge in the more Heideggerian sense, thinking of artworks whose “edginess” disrupts our “natural” attitudes, beliefs, and practices, imparting isolating *Angst* that discloses the world to us in a way that reveals these aspects as more than unassumed background. The link to the experience of the mathematical sublime is even more explicit here, as we can easily see how the magnitude of “sublime” works can evoke this sort of anxiety by presenting a horizon or edge that imparts intimations of the infinite. In this context, we can link the ascension of reason that accompanies the overwhelming of the senses in the feeling of the sublime to the disclosing/disclosed bidirectionality of the *Angst*-inducing object.

An obvious problem with this notion as applied to *Finnegans Wake* is that, while it is easy to imagine “edges” in the plastic arts (the image of the edge is an *extended* one, after all) or even to music or film (where the temporal structure seems most apt), its application to the world of text seems more tenuous. How would this model work when applied to the limiting edges that define a book? Even the temporal aspect of this structure seems problematic, as a book does not unfold in time in the way that a film or piece of music does. The difficulty with moving Casey’s concept into the realm of textuality is basically the problem of the facticity of text. In order for a book to have an “edge,” it would need to be properly factual (disclosing and disclosed) as an “edged” work: not merely factual, and not purely textual (open signifying). In the same volume as Casey’s work, Gregory Schufreider’s essay *Re:Thinking Facticity* addresses the question of the facticity of the text, asking

Can we be confronted with facticity in a text or must we be struck by the brute fact of the book itself? Is its “poetic” operation a (sure) sign of transcendence—of Being or the Text or can a book underline facticity and not simply by highlighting the word but by concretely outlining the end of language itself? (345)

Schufreider is asking whether a book *qua* object is doomed to either mute factuality, resistant to any real access to its being, or as a purely textual entity, interpretable regardless of the particular thrownness of *our* Being in relation to it. Equipped as we are with a superb limit example with *Finnegans Wake*, we can think of this question in terms of how that *book* that could serve as either impossibly opaque and therefore representative of brute factuality, or whose range of possible meanings is so broad as to present the illusion of absolutely open, groundless interpretability of *text*. The question of the book-as-object versus the book-as-text has been asked of *Finnegans Wake* since even before the book was published: the most famous claim of Samuel Beckett’s essay “Dante ... Bruno. Vico. Joyce.” is that the book is “not about something, *it is that something itself*” (14).

This claim is a good summation of the question of the facticity of *Finnegans Wake*, as it seems to be positing the book not as a special kind of text, but as a normal kind of object—a part of the world in a way removed from any signifying power of the words in the text, but rather as the totality of the *book*. This is cognate with the familiar modernist claims regarding the end of art (or in this case, language) and the injunction to “make it new,” and seems as well to be a positive response to Schufreider’s question regarding the facticity of the book, but what would this formulation mean in terms of my model for the *Wake*’s complexity with regard to the Kantian sublime and world disclosure? In short, it would completely negate it. In order for my model to work, the book’s *complexity* and the differential between our ability to understand it on a supersensible versus sensible level is what would evoke anxiety. The book as a whole, as a flat object, can carry with it the *idea* of complexity, but not a complexity we can experience in terms of the minutiae of its linguistic innovation or the instability of its characters or the grand drama of its overarching tale of familial tragedy. The apparent aporia at the centre of my claim is that one must understand the *Wake* in order to be overwhelmed by it, and this is true insofar as one cannot regard it as nonsense, or as a brute factual *objet d’art*. What resolves the aporia, however, is the specificity of my claims with regards to the concepts of facticity and the sublime. I am suggesting a *model* of a possible experience of *Finnegans Wake* that looks like this: In encountering the book, I am at first struck not by its apparent meaninglessness, but by its *surplus* of meaning.

Anyone who has opened the book and made even a halfhearted attempt to read its first few pages knows it is not “mere nonsense” that presents an obstacle to reading the *Wake*, but the proliferation of sense, the piling-up and linking-together of meaning that threatens to overwhelm. The leap from “*commodus vicus*” to “*vicious circle*” is not so difficult, nor is that from

“penisolate” to “peninsular,” nor “thuartpeatrick” to “thou art Patrick,” or “venison” to “very soon” (3). What confounds the imagination and makes one pause in one’s progress is the sense that one is *missing something*. After all, did we not hear somewhere that Vico was a source for Joyce? Could “commodius vicus” be Vico’s circle as well as a vicious one? And Joyce is fond of low puns, so we are sure it is not uncalled for to read “penis” and “isolate” into “penisolate”? It’s not a far cry from there to start hearing “stuart” in “thuart” and “venice,” “veni,” and “venison” in “venisoon.” And all of this before we get to know the characters, and the sigla, and we start looking for every consecutive H, C, and E, (starting with “Howth Castle and Environs” on page 3) and every consecutive A, L, and P, starting with “addle liddle phifie” (4); not to mention what happens when we start getting a sense of *plot*, and start searching for all the falls and all the sins in all their reincarnations.

This proliferation and concatenation of meaning can only occur for a *reader* of the *Wake*, not merely through someone who is aware of its existence as an interesting object. It is only in this process of reading and unfolding all of the meanings of that build up in the text that one can begin to be overwhelmed by the possibilities presented by the text, by its complexity. One has to “leap” into the text in order to be overwhelmed by it and feel the anxiety induced by its multiplicity and apparent limitlessness. Most *Finnegans Wake* readings are undertaken with the aim of *amplifying* this type of complexity by examining, explaining, or commenting on different aspects of the text’s meaning, either in terms of proliferation (the “horizontal” association of meaning we attach to individual words or morphemes) or concatenation (“vertical” chains of meaning that accumulate through the text). In a fairly broad generalization, *Finnegans Wake* criticism belonging to one of two camps: a camp that believes that the book *is something* and a camp that believes the book *means something*. If we return to the division of critical categories

under the headings of the planes of immanent complexity, every one of the critical categories mentioned belongs to the camp committed to the *Wake* as *meaning* something. Genetic critics might be more inclined to the strategy of using Joyce's notes to elucidate this meaning, and structural critics to a "forest rather than trees" approach eschewed by the linguists and the annotators, but they are all attempting to locate meaning in the text's signification rather than in its brute objectivity. These critics, regardless of the particular plane of immanence or intersection of planes to which they turn their attention, are attempting to provide some sort of exegetical reading of the text. Opposed to this would be the type of criticism that diminishes the meaning of the *Wake*, reduces its facticity and textuality, and attempts to turn it into some sort of brute factual object whose only "meaning" is grounded in its flat signification as a "meaningless object" or "complex object" without acknowledging or investigating any of the textual meaning that makes up that complexity. Composing summaries for *Finnegans Wake* critical works is a somewhat redundant task, especially recently, due to the existence of so many excellent surveys (notably David Vichnar's recent *Joyce Against Theory*, and Geert Lernout's polemical *The French Joyce*), so I will be providing only a very general look at the modes of critical engagement which highlight aspects of the text germane to this discussion. As a mode of organization, I will first look at *Finnegans Wake* criticism which exemplifies the micro/macro differential of the text and encounters with it by showing how different approaches magnify detailed aspects of the work or its general shape before moving on to look at one critical work (Brett Bourbon's *Finding a Replacement for the Soul*) that treats the *Wake* as nonsense, before concluding with a short look at two exemplary works that embody the critical attempt to give *Finnegans Wake* its "edge," to allow it to evoke the anxiety and awe which I suggest can be associated with the experience of facticity and the feeling of the sublime.

Critical Practice: Micropsia/Macropsia

In his essay “Hermeneutic resistance: Four test cases for the notion of literary uninterpretability”

Leonard Orr writes of *Finnegans Wake* that

The attempts to understand or explain the methods used by actual readers to process unreadable texts do not seem to move beyond notions that whatever incoherence, fragmentation, repetition, abstruse or unknowable references are placed before them, the readers’ predilection to discover coherence and fill in everything that is needed to make a complete reading takes precedence. (130)

His essay puts forward the two complaints familiar to anyone who has read an introduction to *Finnegans Wake*, or, for that matter, its reviews on Amazon.com: either the book is completely impossible to interpret, and merely a brute factual object present-to-hand but not able to either ground our sense of being in the world or open itself up to hermeneutics; or it is a completely open work into which we may read whatever we wish, serving as mere echo chamber for our own neuroses or beliefs. Different manifestations of this complaint rely on various aspects of the interpretive process, but most focus on the work itself as unknowable, rather than the inaccessibility of the writer or the failings of the interpreter. In a different explanation of this problem, Michael Patrick Gillespie, in his *The Aesthetics of Chaos*, argues that even the scholarship related to *Finnegans Wake* has been either too concerned with pulling a linear narrative out of the text, or too willing to give up the pursuit of meaning in favor of celebrating the absolute openness of the text. He writes:

The problem facing readers of the *Wake*—although articulated in various forms—has always been the same: how does one acknowledge its complexity yet at the same time approach it with a system of interpretation simple enough to encompass its magnitude? [...] We comprehend the complexity of *Finnegans Wake* through complicated models of discernment, and efforts to articulate those models according to a linear form prove hopelessly simplistic. (34)

The implication, as far as interpretability goes, is that critical gestures towards reading the *Wake* either emphasize non-linearity as methodology, moving the interpretive model away from grounded interaction with the text and emphasizing the book as pure open textual signification, or impose an artificial linearity that necessarily ignores the complex and non-linear body of the text itself, thereby consigning our interaction with it to a sort of apprehension of a ready-to-hand object, impossible to assimilate outside of brute factuality. We can also understand this quandary in light of the set of terms borrowed from the Kantian concept of the mathematical sublime. If we think of *Finnegans Wake* as the possible object for evoking the experience of sublimity, it would need to be experienced in a particular way in order to create that experience. Although the sublime is associated with formlessness and is therefore fundamentally different from the experience of beauty, it still needs to possess some feature allowing our supersensibility (reason) to grasp it as a totality despite our sensible faculties being overwhelmed. If we take that basic relational model and apply it to the scholarly treatment of *Finnegans Wake*, we can think of Gillespie's point as being that when we apply simple models to the *Wake* in order to understand it, we artificially reduce it in size and complexity, bringing it to a point where it could never overwhelm us. However, when we examine it under the aegis of a critical concept that demands we emphasize its openness and play of meanings, its "infinite semiosis," we do the opposite—we distort its possibilities in the opposite direction, making it even larger than it is and eliminating the possibility of grasping it as a totality even on a supersensible level. Each extreme thus produces a sort of "Alice in Wonderland syndrome" effect of distorting our proximity to the text and consequently our ability to understand it. As usual with claims made regarding the "readability" of *Finnegans Wake*, on a certain level we can generalize them as referring to the act of interpreting literature in general; however, the *Wake* presents a special case through its

quantitatively differentiated degree of complexity. It is also worth keeping in mind that the micropsia/macropsia or oversimplification/overcomplexification Gillespie suggests is endemic to *Finnegans Wake* criticism should not be taken as an indictment of the critical mode; the fact that these extremes of criticism are even *possible* suggests *Finnegans Wake* as suitable for a model of literary complexity interfacing with the concepts of sublimity and facticity, as I have suggested here. With those caveats in mind, I will turn to a slightly modified list of the critical categories put forth by Finn Fordham in his *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake* and provide a summation of each in the context of my critical concepts. My version of his list is as follows:

1. Structural
2. Narrational
3. Formal²¹
4. Theoretical
5. Philological
6. Genetic
7. Anti-critical²²
8. Exegetical

As mentioned above, there are no shortages of surveys of *Finnegans Wake* scholarship, but Fordham provides what, to my mind, are the most accurate categorical divisions, and I will rely on his general overviews as a background for my summaries.

1. Structural

The major attribute defining a structural approach would be its attention to the entirety of the work—a characteristic which, for most books, would seem a prerequisite for any study, but

²¹ I have added this section as linguistic analyses of the work did not seem to fit easily into any of the other categories. I have also removed Fordham's category of "Inspirational," as he does not include any actual critical works into this category.

²² This category is my addition. It is worth noting that even in Fordham's admirable list, and my expansion of it, many critical works would be excluded including those whose aim is propaedeutic, those focusing on reader responses, and those summarizing critical works. Fordham's exclusion of them is likely for the same reason that I have followed him in this exclusion: their existence, while important, does not contribute significantly to my argument.

which for the *Wake* is, in fact, extraordinary. There are many ways of approaching the concept of complexity without any notions of completeness, but the structural approach to *Finnegans Wake* highlights the *Gesamtkunstwerk* aspect of the book in both the literal sense of its totality and the Wagnerian sense of its unification of diverse forms. We can think of structural approaches as providing models for looking at the unification of content throughout the book. Fordham describes these types of readings as providing “bird’s-eye views and [...] skeletal outlines of the overall form: this commonly has recourse to [...] Vico” (7). Vico’s theme of the ages of history and their recurrence is important not only for Joyce’s reference to them (in the sense covered below by the “Philology” entry) but for how it structures the work as a whole, from its circular form to its themes of recurrence and recapitulations. The most famous of structural criticism of the *Wake* is Clive Hart’s *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake*, which admirably outlines the architectonic correspondences between Vico’s theory of history and Joyce’s text. Structural criticism need not refer to Vico, of course, and any work that attempts to provide an overarching account of the book’s themes (on the macro level) and how they relate to the particularities of the details of its language could be considered structural. This type of approach is obviously important for the model I am suggesting, as some form of general macro-level coherence, or at least the foreseeable possibility of such, is necessary for both the micro/macro correspondence I have suggested should be linked to the Kantian sublime. Additionally, in order for the book to be capable of *evoking* sublimity, it should be able to be grasped at a supersensible level, which in this example would correspond to a reader being able to understand the relations between the micro and macro levels of the text on a structural level despite being overwhelmed by the language in the experience of reading. The first of these

requirements belongs to the plane of complexity immanent to the book, the second to that of the reader, and it is with these two planes that structural criticism is generally concerned.

The role of structural criticism in relation to the first plane is fairly straightforward. On this plane, a structural explanation of the text is excellent at explaining how, in Hart's words, "every paragraph in *Finnegans Wake* is both built up out of pieces drawn from elsewhere in the book and, conversely, capable of being broken down and related to all the diverse contexts from which those pieces came" (167). Of course, genetic criticism can show how this process occurred in the course of the book's actual creation, but structural criticism shows how these correspondences function without recourse to diachronic examinations. Slightly more complicated is the relation between structural criticism and the reading subject. In some sense, the early structural critics—among whom we could even count Beckett, given his essay on Joyce and Vico—served as the first necessary bridge between the reader and what may have seemed like an impossibly complex internal structure. Clive Hart comments on this when he writes that, just as

in much of the twelve-tone music written by contemporaries of Joyce [...], the internal structural relationships to which the artist gives so much weight—the quasi-geometrical configurations in *Finnegans Wake* on the one hand, and the composer's mathematically defined tone-rows on the other—may not themselves be apprehendable by any but the critic and the artist. (15)

Structural critical work can, like genetic work, help to bridge this gap and provide the necessary architectonic information, a situation we will see paralleled in the chapter on Stockhausen; however, it can also complicate the relationship between the reader and the text in interesting ways. Klaus Reichert writes that

[*Finnegans Wake*]'s unreadability is partially due to the fact that the reader as acting subject has been made part of the process of the text which he has to follow up in its modifications; he experiences what it means to be part of the multi-layered strata of the historical process; Vico's examples have become for him "the

things themselves,” and as “acting subject in history” in this sense he cannot step out of this process and by watching from above detect the rules of his acting. (“Vico’s Method and its Relation to Joyce’s”, 54)

If we translate this into the vocabulary established in this chapter, we could say that *Finnegans Wake* causes anxiety because its world-historical themes include the reader in the factual world of the text, and vice-versa. Reichert suggests that the structure of the *Wake*, with its emphasis on Vichian themes of recircularity and its manic cultural inclusiveness, creates a textual world that includes or implicates the reader. Although the fact that Reichert relates this to the book’s “unreadability” and to examples as “things themselves” suggest that he is treating the book as a sort of mute factual object; this experience of being included in the process of the text could only happen in relation to a meaningful factual object. If the book includes us in its process and makes us unable to step outside of it and “detect the rules,” then it is clearly inducing a factual experience of the world, a *disclosing* of the world to ourselves as subjects *disclosed* by that very world. The “unreadability” is merely the anxiety of this situation. What is interesting about Reichert’s suggestion is that it links this experience to the *structure* of the text, showing that this experience of facticity is not merely a product of the unfolding of the minutiae of signification, but could also be evoked through the text’s broader architectonic adumbrations. This links the experience even more strongly to the model of the mathematical sublime, showing how a macro-level understanding of the text corresponds to the Kantian concept of supersensible understanding and the anxiety of the world-disclosing experience corresponds to the overwhelmed/comprehending differential of the sublime.

A different version of this concept is suggested in Clive Hart’s *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake*, where he writes that

[T]he large body of externally oriented correspondences in *Finnegans Wake* [...]

were intended to ensure the book should take its place as a microcosmic unity wholly integrated into the macrocosm. It is not true however, of the equally important narcissistic correspondences which function entirely within this book, building up its internal harmonies and tensions. These operate at all possible levels and in all possible directions—back and forth in time, in space, in planes of consciousness, and up and down the spiritual scale, which Joyce reinstated by his use of Vico’s graded Ages. (149–159)

Hart is positing a *fractal* interpretation of the microcosmic/macrocosmic structure of the *Wake* whereby the text, itself made up of numerous internal “narcissistic” macro/micro correspondences, serves as a microcosm for the universe as a whole. Although put in very different terms, this is essentially the same point as Reichert’s, and likewise related to its Vichian structure. Hart is here talking about the complexity of the book in terms seemingly immanent to the work itself, but in his line about “planes of consciousness” we can see an easy link to both Reichert’s point and mine. A structural reading of the book reveals a series of complex correspondences, harmonies, and tensions immanent to the text that allow us to understand the book’s macrocosmic structure as recapitulating its microcosmic details. This correspondence implies a third term: the external world (*de hors-text*) an implication which includes the reader and the plane of complexity immanent to the reading subject. This link discloses the world of the reader *as the world including and corresponding to the text in all of its multifarious complexity*. This, understandably, causes some anxiety in the reader, but also a sense of awe. This differential could be profitably compared to the evocation of the Kantian mathematical sublime.

2. Narrational

Put simply, narrational criticism has as its goal a retelling of *Finnegans Wake* as a more or less

coherent narrative. This type of critical approach, most notably in Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson's *Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*, was extremely important in the development of Wake criticism, not only because it finally shattered the perception of the book as a shambolic and possibly stochastic collection of unrelated sentences or paragraphs. Although overly reliant on Jungian archetypes as a guiding principle, Campbell and Robinson's work was a groundbreaking and still relevant work for its pioneering attempt to synthesize a thematic running through the entire text. What the *Skeleton Key* provided was the first *possibility* for viewing *Finnegans Wake* as a totally ordered whole. Using a conceptual structure similar to the familiar Homeric readings of *Ulysses*, Campbell and Robinson reduce the structure of the *Wake* to something resembling a novelistic structure, minimizing horizontal proliferations of meaning and emphasizing concatenations of meaning in a more or less linear sense by first highlighting the recurrences of mythical figures, mapping them to the Earwicker family characters which “inhabit” them, and using this model of interpretation to assemble a “naturalistic” plot resembling a typical novel. This type of reading, characterized by Margret Norris as the “conservative approach” in that it is reductive to a traditional novelistic form, is, as Finn Fordham points out, still very useful as “a positioning tool, a locating device for reorientation whenever the experience of disorientation becomes too much” (11). Fordham provides an admirable narrational summary himself, reducing each chapter to a paragraph or two describing the events as a narrative, and concluding by writing that

There is no denying that it is a strange story or rather set of stories, amassed gradually, with an underlying investigation into the nature of a human family and its culpable place in the planet, fragmented and glued together as if by an exploded and then restored encyclopedia. Such accounts can easily be expanded, less easily reduced. But all such accounts only pave the way for further work. The form of *Finnegans Wake* is something that can be reduced, tidied and shrunk in this way, only as a prelude to unpacking, unfolding and unraveling it. Moreover, narrative is present just as much in the clashing encounter of one word or phrase

or context with another as in any set of tales. (15)

This description is important for showing how narrational accounts of *Finnegans Wake* are unable to provide the sort of factual grounding and possibility for broad understanding that a structural reading can. Like a structural reading, they provide broad macro-level overviews of the work, but unlike those type of readings, they provide no real understanding of the micro/macro relationship and are therefore incapable of imparting a sense of having understood the book.

3. Formal

By “formal” criticism, I mean those critical works which examine *Finnegans Wake* through the lens of some sort of literary formalism, usually linguistics. A particular example would be the use of Prague school linguistics to interpret the language of the *Wake*. S.A. Henke provides an example of this type of reading, writing that

Since the publication of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* in 1939, no other work of literature in English has illustrated more clearly the aesthetic triumph of syntagma over system, of *significant* over *signifié*. Joyce has succeeded in producing a “maximal” example of what Jan Mukařovský has described as “aesthetic foregrounding” through a discourse which calls total attention to the act of artistic expression. (“James Joyce and the Prague School: Aesthetic Foregrounding in *Finnegans Wake*”, 185)

Like other formal analyses, those produced within the discourse of Prague school linguistics mostly work on the micro-level of morphemic and lexemic detail, and emphasize this process of aesthetic foregrounding. This type of analysis serves to draw attention to what I have referred to above as the horizontal and vertical axes of meaning: proliferation of association and concatenation of meaning. Henke’s analysis suggests that only the first is foregrounded in the *Wake*, a reading obviously opposed to any sort of structural analysis, and based on the idea that the chain of possible associations and polyvalent meanings extant in any of the many portmanteau words in the *Wake* preclude the necessary concatenation or systemic association of

meanings necessary for developing a sense of structure or narrative. This is easily disproved through, again, the structural readings of the text, but should not suggest that a formal reading necessary leads to the privileging of the micro-level associative proliferation of syntagmatic meaning over the macro-level concatenation of paradigmatic meaning.

Laurent Milesi's essay "Metaphors of the Quest in *Finnegans Wake*" is filled with counterexamples to Henke's analysis—especially useful as he often works to place them in the context of the work of interpreting literature in general. He writes:

If one posits that all literature is made of metaphoric language insofar as its interpretation or subjective appropriation implies a contrary process of literalization, then the study of metaphor in a text which in so many ways dramatizes and heightens literariness should impose itself. Indeed the Wakean idiom can be best described as metaphoric in construction; the letter is the smallest *meta-phorizable* unit in the portmanteau method of composition, which coins new elements through a series of metaphoric displacements and synecdochic condensations²³ in order to saturate the paradigmatic axis, and the various *trans-lations* or transfers (what was implied in the Greek word *metaphora*), of leitmotifs and themes into other contexts, generate a truly metaphoric progression of the narration, which the break in the opening/closing sentence so obviously activates. (79)

Here Milesi shows how the displacements and condensations of Joyce's syntagmatic selection are integral in developing not only the paradigmatic or systemic axis, but the *narrative* itself. Milesi's essay illustrates this through an exploration of the quest metaphor in the *Wake* and its development through syntagmatic selection and polyvalent puns, the details of which are too involved to get into here, but I will quote him once more as he places his formal reading in the context of genetic readings:

If Joyce's nightbook gradually developed a malleable idiom capable of expressing the mind's linguistic indirections in sleep and dream contexts, the apparently humorous, indomitable pun at its base also worked, as is evidenced by conceptual notes and drafts in the structuration period (1923–1926), as the most efficient of narrative connectors likely to exponentially generate multipolar

²³ This is a subtle evocation of Freud and Lacan the relevance of which will be clearer when related to my next quote from this essay below.

creation and strong structuring ferments out of chance coinages. The poetic development typical of the *Wake*, from the pun to the narrative sequence fusing themes and lexical items, hinges on this linguistic-narrative interface, and behind it, on the cluster of tropes generally held to be at the centre of the figural space, metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche, whose interactive roles have been variously distributed and accounted for in “linguistic” (semantic, grammatical) and more literary studies of the metaphor alike. (103)

This is a superb description of how formal and genetic readings can connect the three planes of immanent complexity in a way which grounds the textuality of the book in factual experience as well as in the process of creation. The basic idiomatic form of the *Wake*'s language emerged from structural planning as well as linguistic experimentation accessible to us through the notes and drafts to the text. Their existence as narrational and structural connectors is only understandable in terms of the completed work as a whole, however, and the “chance coinages” these narrative connectors are so efficacious at generating rely on the mind of, and attention of, a reading subject.

This is not a total rebuttal to the complaint whereby the *Wake*'s “endless convolutions have been treated as a kind of endless verbal equivalent of the Rorschach Ink-blot Test” (Hart 29). However, it does emphasize how the associations of meaning on the syntagmatic selection of the text is reliant on the associative powers of the reader, just as the paradigmatic connections rely on the reader's ability to link the core “cluster of tropes” that tie the micro-level of textual play to the macro-level thematics.

4. Theoretical

I will not spend much time on the theoretical treatment of the *Wake*, as there have been at least

two entire books dedicated to explicating the relationship between “theory” and the *Wake*. What is important about the relationship between theorists of literature and *Finnegans Wake* can be stated fairly simply. To the protestations of many dedicated *Wake* scholars, the “theoretical” approach is one that treats the text as an interesting example of a particular theoretical point, without any great attention to the specifics of its contents. This chapter certainly belongs to this category in some ways, as I have overtly avoided performing any “readings” of the text itself, relying instead on descriptions of the problems the text presents. In some ways this is emblematic of the usual complaints about theoretical approach, in that I am using *Finnegans Wake* to develop a point relevant to critical and philosophical models, not merely as a reading of the book. When the label of “theoretical” is applied, usually derogatorily, to a *Finnegans Wake* critic or commentator, it is usually in the context of a post-structuralist reading of the text. As Fordham writes of the philosophers and critics associated with post-structuralism:

Jacques Lacan, Hélène Cixious, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Julia Kristeva—made references to *Finnegans Wake* in a series of works during the 1960s and 1970s. Their approaches were rarely intended to clarify specific elements—whether of narrative, character, structure or allusion. Inhab Hassan, though by no means coming from the context of French post-structuralism, admits to something similar: “I am no deep reader of that book. I have little to say that will illumine its puns and patterns, its susurrus and sources.” Nonetheless they were keen to speak generally of its radical project, to reflect in particular on its language and even to emulate, to some extent, its difficulty and complexity, its non-referentiality and non-communicability. (16)

One can read this type of engagement as dilettantism, as Geert Lernout does in his polemical *The French Joyce*, or as merely passive engagement with a text one might not have the time or interest necessary to engage with on a deeper level. What is more interesting is the question of what these type of readings advance in terms of the interpretability and facticity of the text. Jacques Derrida’s “Two Words for Joyce” is perhaps the most interesting “theoretical” approach to the *Wake* in this regard, especially for its direct response to the question of Derrida’s own level

of familiarity and involvement with the text. This piece, a talk given in November of 1982 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, begins with a cursory analysis of two words from *Finnegans Wake*, “HE WAR,” and moves on to a sort of auto-historical coverage of Derrida’s own history of involvement with Joyce’s writings (beginning with his comparison of Joyce’s and Husserl’s strategies in *Introduction to The Origin of Geometry*). Along the way, Derrida raises the issue of the “resentment” that he and many other writers feel towards Joyce’s writings:

It is with this sentiment, or one should say this resentment, that I must have been reading Joyce for a long time. And no doubt I’m not the only one [...]. But I’m not sure that one can say “reading Joyce” as I just have. Of course, one can do nothing but that, whether one knows it or not. But the utterances “I am reading Joyce”, “read Joyce”, “have you read Joyce?” produce an irresistible effect of naivety, irresistibly comical. What exactly do you mean by “read Joyce”? Who can pride himself on having “read” Joyce? With this admiring resentment, you stay on the edge of reading Joyce—for me this has been going on for twenty-five or thirty years—and the endless plunge throws you back onto the river-bank, on the brink of another possible immersion, *ad infinitum*. Is this true to the same extent of all works? (148)

This passage highlights many of the *strengths* of the theoretical perspective, as well as the anxieties it induces. My thesis regarding the possible evocation of the sublime through the reading of *Finnegans Wake* would be much more lucid to someone like Derrida, whose engagement with the text remains peripheral even after thirty years. A “true” scholar, one whose entire career had been devoted to *Wake* studies, might not recognize the perception of perpetual newness the book is capable of inspiring. Derrida’s encounter with the text of *Finnegans Wake* is not shallow, as many other commentators have noted, but it is not an reading with a primary or even secondary aim of explicating the text. His “use” of Joyce is conceptual, mimetic, or both. We can see the question of the difference in degree or kind lingering in the last sentence quoted above, as well as the fact that this is, for Derrida, a more interesting question than more specific ones we could ask about the *Wake* as a decontextualized work to be studied in some of the other

ways listed here. Derrida's anxiety about reading Joyce is related to his status outside the world of Joyce studies²⁴, but it is also related to a particular status he accords Joyce's texts. Derrida goes on to explain how, regardless of his lack of direct engagement with Joyce's texts in a traditional literary-critical manner, something of their substance has suffused his own writings throughout his career: "every time I write, and even in the most academic pieces of my work, Joyce's ghost is always coming on board" (149). This ghostly presence as opposed to direct engagement can, as Lernout would suggest, imply a sort of dilettantism, but Derrida makes it clear that this fact of Joyce's presence in his own work is a direct result of the complex relationship that *Finnegans Wake* has to the world of other texts: "a part larger than the whole of which it is a part" (148).

This paradoxical expression is Derrida's way of explaining the *Wake*'s synecdochic relationship to the world of text and the world of culture. He writes that "*Finnegans Wake* is a little, a little what?, a little son, a little grandson of Western culture in its circular, encyclopedic, Ulyssean and more than Ulyssean totality" (149). Referring here to both Joyce's *Ulysses* and the "Ulyssean" culture of the post-Homeric West, Derrida posits the *Wake* as a restating of Western culture in miniature, but one so inclusive that it ends up drawing its sources into itself and becoming larger than its source. A side effect of this process is to draw its commentators into its wake as well: "everything we can say after it looks in advance like a minute self-commentary with which this work accompanies itself" (149).

Derrida, like other "theoretical" critics, never engages in a detailed examination of Joyce's texts, nor provides a "reading" in any of the senses listed here, but his relationship to Joyce's writings reveals an aspect of the effect of *Finnegans Wake* on its readers and on other

²⁴ As he points out in his second direct engagement with Joyce scholars, "Ulysses Gramophone," collected in his *Acts of Literature*.

writers. By positing it as an all-consuming textual machine, he establishes his own relationship to Joyce, as well as suggesting something about the circular nature of the book's factual relationship with its readers that may have remained obscure to those whose immersion in the text prevented a broader cultural standpoint. While not every "theoretical" scholar Fordham lists can claim the same depth of reading of the *Wake* (Deleuze & Guattari, for example, can't be bothered to spell the title correctly), Derrida's example shows that there need not be an inherent weakness to this type of approach, and that the perspective of a lay-Joycean philosopher can be as important as the application of a philosopher's concepts by a Joyce scholar.

5. Philological

The use of this term to categorize a type of *Wake* critical practice is, I believe, exclusive to Fordham's book and, as his description is excellent, I will let him summarize it at length:

I use philological in the sense of a set of traditional practices, part of which annotates literary texts, chases allusions, elucidates obscurity, and clarifies intertextual reference. It typically provides helpful, if pedantic notes, at the bottom of students' editions. Where the preceding systems provide a bird's-eye view, this one gets its hands dirty, burrowing down into the work at the ground or underground level. [...] At one level it celebrates the breadth of *Finnegans Wake*, and of the worlds to which *Finnegans Wake* refers; at another, it can be used to identify Joyce's critical preoccupations with his world. [...] At its worst, it presents the *Wake* unquestioningly to be an Encyclopedia Joyceana [...] What may be lacking as a result is a synthesis of the many detailed parts which the approach furnishes, and readings of the contexts in which the several parts appear. It can elucidate an allusion, but not say why the allusion is there or how it relates to similar allusions elsewhere. Interpretation may be discouraged as not positivistic enough. [...] Nonetheless, Joyce glossed and annotated passages for his readers [...], and in this Joyce seemed to sanction the philological approach. (21–22)

While there are certainly other texts which encourage or even necessitate this type of approach (Melville's *The Confidence Man*, for one), few have produced anything like the cottage industry

of *Wakean* philologists. As Fordham points out, this type of approach can work on several levels, the most illuminating of which is the creation of many points of connection between the text of the *Wake* and the world on which it comments. It can also, of course, devolve into mere biographical function tracing: finding the books Joyce read or probably read and mining them for connections to the text. This type of approach impoverishes the *Wake*, as its emphasis on strict correlation between the writer and the text precludes the type of chance generation of meaning that Milesi's formal analysis emphasized as so vital to the experience of the work. On the other hand, the less biographically focused version of philological criticism greatly enhances the experience of reading the *Wake* by opening up the allusions and clarifying references. (Excepting some passages I know very well, I rarely read it for any serious amount of time without having McHugh's *Annotations* open alongside it.) This has the important effect of integrating the text more closely into the world in which we read it, allowing its own world-disclosive powers more traction or hold.

6. Genetic

Genetic criticism of the *Wake* can be seen as an offshoot of philological research, and in some ways resembles the biographically focused approaches under that category; however, its realm of investigation remains textual, even if those texts are ancillary to the specific text of *Finnegans Wake*. Mostly based on the sixty-three volumes of the *James Joyce Archive*, genetic research involves what Fordham describes as "leafing through Joyce's manuscripts, with their notebooks, drafts, fair copies, printer's copies and proofs of 'Work in progress'" (22). Genetic criticism is the most explicit form of critical attention to the interface between the plane immanent to the text and that immanent to the writer, and as such, tends towards an attention to minutiae of process

over cohesion of thematic. This attention to the micro-details of the text is most evident in the articles being produced by students and immersed in the details of the notebooks. The online journal *Genetic Joyce Studies* provides many examples of this type of research, and excellent recent article being Martin Brick's "Joyce's Overlisting Eshtree: A Genetic Approach to Sacred Trees in *Finnegans Wake*". This paper is an excellent example of the value of genetic studies, as although it accomplishes what its title implies (a catalog of sacred trees in the *Wake* and their genetic provenance), it goes much further in its implications, providing, as all good genetic papers do, insight into the methods and concepts behind the artist's creation of the work. While surveying the sacred trees which appear in one episode (sub-chapter), Brick writes that:

Joyce's encyclopedic technique is no secret, but it seems pertinent to note that the trees of this episode are counter-posed, not merely juxtaposed. This is not a matter of gathering a series of similar references to establish a thematic response, but rather more akin to Joyce's portmanteau words in which one signifier points toward a number of signifieds.

He then goes on to list the counter-posed trees, (including the Ygdrassil, the tree of knowledge and the cross in Christian mythology, and the maypole) before writing that

Readers may interpret this array of trees in a number of ways, but I wish to outline two basic approaches. First, readers might see the trees as representing Joyce's aforementioned encyclopedic penchant. [...] One might say that these allusions emphasize the tree-like nature of the scene – everything is branching, connected. Events have myriad, far-reaching consequences, perhaps most basically summoning genealogical impressions. If this first approach promotes one single, broad response to the text, a second explanation might be that the various allusions elicit no response. Rather than simply resonating tree-ness, or specifically echoing the Tree of Knowledge in this passage, this arrangement of trees might serve to complicate the exegesis of the scene in a manner that forecloses conclusive interpretation, and further, detracts attention from their interpretation at all.

So far, these observations are based exclusively on the published version of the text, and more properly belong to the exegetical and philological traditions, but it is important to note the open interpretive attitude with which Brick explains the possible readings of the text at this stage. As

the article proceeds to the genetic stage of research, Brick outlines the appearance in the drafts of each of these trees, showing how the multiple arboreal symbols seem to imply religious symmetries and asymmetries; “branchings” as opposed to the flat signification of “treeness” compounded by repetition. What the genetic aspect of his reading contributes is the fact that the additional trees were all present from the very first draft, and modifications only shifted particularities on the level of syntax and word order. In the context of what genetic critics know about Joyce’s process, this is a significant contribution to understanding the role of religion in the episode. Joyce’s usual method of “seeding” a passage with multiple synonyms or associated terms from a variety of languages would support the “treeness” hypothesis, but this type of proliferation was usually accomplished at a later stage in the writing. Brick’s demonstration that the multiple sacred trees were present from the start shows that the “horizontal” axis of proliferation of meaning was an integral element of the text from the start, and can be linked more strongly to the “vertical” concatenation of meaning in the text, including the many other explorations of multiple religions icons. This demonstrates how genetic readings basically expand the world of the text of *Finnegans Wake* by integrating another axis into the available readings: one composed of the strata of consecutive drafts and notes Joyce compiled on his way to the final text of the *Wake*. This enlarged text must still technically be examined synchronically, as the notes do not exist in perfect chronological order, but works such as the Luca Crispi and Sam Slote edited *How Joyce Wrote Finnegans Wake* have strived to give a diachronic account of the process of Joyce’s creation. Both of these approaches further the same paradoxical sense of expanding the scope of the work while explaining it, furthering the reader’s engagement with the perceived infinity of the text and fostering the type of anxiety that discloses the text as its own world.

7. Anti-Critical (*Finnegans Wake* as Nonsense)

A recent *Guardian* article sarcastically titled “World exclusive! *Finnegans Wake* nonsense!” suggests that this claim is not entirely unique, but most versions of it would not strictly belong to the world of criticism. There are, however, more nuanced approaches to the idea that *Finnegans Wake* is nonsense, exemplary of which is Brett Bourbon’s *Finding a Replacement for the Soul*. Bourbon approaches the concept of nonsense from the perspective of speech act theory, a lengthy dissection of which has no place here, but it is worth understanding his perspective; so I will quote his central point at length:

Are the sentences within the fiction of the *Wake* about anything? [W]e do not understand how characters in the *Wake* can be persons in any ordinary sense, so barring an elaborate theory about this, we cannot ascribe mental states or intentional stances to these characters. This is doubly true since the distortions of sense are pervasively semantic, making us feel as if the *Wake* shows us some alternate world, so that we have no way of understanding any Wakean sentence as expressive of anything like our thoughts. If the content of Wakean sentences and the Wakean fiction is not provided by our retelling of elements of that language such that it is given a sense, then what it is about must rely on the way that the sentences can be and are about something. Given the semantic experiments and distortions, any claim about what the *Wake* as a fiction is about requires that we establish that the sentences can and do have content as they stand. Although some sentences might, since some still do consist of English words in some legitimate syntactical pattern, this may not be enough for us to give any but the most tentative description of their content. The putative content of most Wakean sentences requires elaborate translation.

A nonsensical sentence is not about anything. If we cannot determine its content or if we cannot take any sentence as expressing a legitimate thought, and if we do not understand the state of affairs about which any sentence would be making a claim separate from the sense of these sentences (we do not have our sense of the world to appeal to), then such a nonsensical sentence can provide few reasons to justify claiming that it is about anything or that it can express propositional attitudes. This suggests that all interpretations of *Finnegans Wake* are not about the *Wake* at all: *There is nothing for them to be about which the Wake could itself be about*. They are simply about themselves as interpretations. (154)

From Bourbon’s perspective, every critical work on *Finnegans Wake* is exclusively autological.

The possibility of a heterological critique is precluded by the lack of a meaningful object of study, defined by him as a work which could contain definite sensible statements. *Finnegans Wake*, according to Bourbon, is utterly devoid of these. This type of argument is exclusively about the interface between the reading subject and the text, and relies on a few assumptions about the meaning of “meaning.” One of these assumptions is that “fiction is not about anything *except* to the degree that I can interpret my world or myself within it or through it” (99); another is that “to the degree that the study of literature is bound to interpretation is it concerned with nonsense and its localized normalization” (79). Bourbon’s book is a deep construction and exploration of these and other assumptions, and any summary here is not going to do justice to his thesis, but we can examine his claim regarding *Finnegans Wake* and its consequences on the basis of these two assumptions alone without doing too much violence to his argument.

As can be seen from the first of these assumptions, the facticity of a text, its power to be understood within a particular world and disclose aspects of that world, is for Bourbon the *only* meaning that a book can have. The possibility of a non-factual book would be identical with a meaningless one. From the second assumption, we can see that the role of criticism is to elucidate the particular structure of this meaning-making power of factual fiction within the specific world of the fictional text and its reader. The author’s intentions have no place in this model, but the possibility of reading intentions into the *characters* that populate these fictions *do* matter, as their ability to produce meaningful speech acts is necessary for the production of localized meaning and, apparently, for our ability as readers to understand our world through the characters (166). As *Finnegans Wake*, for Bourbon, fails this test, and he judges the critical works to have failed in their ability to provide localized sense (a relatable world) from the nonsense of fiction, the text cannot be said to mean anything, leading to the conclusion that all

critical works are *exclusively* autological. What this leads to, for Bourbon, is the conclusion that:

The vanishing of any intentional target for Wakean language picks us out as its target (exposing a crisis about how we constitute our world as ours), which means that what we are shown to be in reading the *Wake* is ourselves the shifting limit between sense and nonsense. *Finnegans Wake*, itself, is a description of the human mind enacting this vanishing intentionality. The book is about us because it cannot be about anything else. The failure of intentionality is true within the fiction as well. There exists neither an intelligible sense of mind nor of person within the *Wake*, except ours reading. (167)

It is worth pointing out that this in some way resembles a version of the argument above, whereby the *Wake*'s reliance on Vichian structure makes it a microcosm of the world, therefore including us in its fractal pattern of microcosm/macrocosm. However, given that there is nothing in Bourbon's statement that could not equally be true of the experience of reading a book composed only of randomly typed letters, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is a deeply silly version of this claim. The problem with the type of analysis Bourbon undertakes, just as with all claims that *Finnegans Wake* is total nonsense, is that they are a fundamental misuse of the Hilary Putnam claim regarding the ant whose scurrying across the sand forms a portrait of Winston Churchill. Putnam claims that this image is *not* a portrait of Churchill, which is reasonable given the definition of a portrait as having some intentionality behind it, but Putnam's very ability to describe, even in imagination, this unintentional object *as resembling* a portrait of Churchill means that on the level of phenomenological reception there is a valid interpretation of this imagined object that corresponds to an image of Winston Churchill. Claims about the nonsense of *Finnegans Wake* must necessarily posit the text as a version of the ant's portrait. In terms of the plane of complexity immanent to the writer, they must necessarily bracket it, as there is too much genetic evidence for the "meaning" and development of the work. Joyce must be posited as the ant. As for the critics, they must be posited as coming across this object that *resembles* meaning, but does not really possess it, for it is clear from the great many critical

works in all of the above categories that it is possible to find fairly straightforward meaning in the text and in fact to read it with great ease.²⁵ The anti-critic then, is in the position of one who comes across a great crown assembled on a beach, pointing at a portrait of Winston Churchill on the sand. The anti-critic cannot, from their perspective, make anything of this image, and concludes that it must not only not exist, but have been created unintentionally. Probably by an ant.

A more sober examination of this type of claim could point out its similarities to a text written in another language. Say I come across a text written in Arabic, a language I cannot read or speak. In the absence of a translator or a dictionary, should I assume that the text is really about my own consciousness? If I am forced to rely on a translator, am I right to claim that anything this translator writes is really about his own interpretation and is therefore entirely autological? This is much the position an early reader of the *Wake* is put in. The language is not ours, but there are those who have learned it, and translators abound, as do dictionaries. Its sense often only coalesces with the help of these intermediaries, but this does not reduce its ability to comment on our world, or to be a meaningful text, regardless of its complexity or immediate opacity. Critics like Bourbon are important, however, in that they clearly delineate the problems with asserting that *Finnegans Wake* is different in kind and not in degree: one ends up making claims that result in tautology in that they are true of every text or none (the claim that all fiction is “really about us”) or in absurdity (a book I cannot personally interpret must be about the human mind). Bourbon’s claim is in some ways similar to mine, as we could easily relate his insistence on the self-reflection the nonsense of the *Wake* induces to the Heideggerian concept of *Angst* and its world-disclosive powers, but his account negates the facticity of the book, positing

²⁵ Objecting to my comparison of *Finnegans Wake* to the Kantian sublime, a Joycean exclaimed that there was nothing complex about the experience of reading it for him anymore and that “One can [eventually] read *Finnegans Wake* as one reads a newspaper!” (Laurent Milesi, in conversation).

it as a meaningless object. This returns us to the question asked by Schufreider with regards to: “Can we be confronted with facticity in a text or must we be struck by the brute fact of the book itself (345).” For Bourbon, the *Wake* only confronts us with its fact, and although he couches his description of its effect in the *language* of the *Wake*, this language does not, in his conception, “mean” anything.

My examples of Euclid and Sappho above should make clear the types of complexity inherent in the act of interpreting even a linguistically “simple” text, but even if we remove the historical personages of Euclid and Sappho from the equation, we cannot make claims as to the nonsensicality inherent in the interface between us as reading subjects and texts as interpretable objects without abandoning the entire possibility of hermeneutics and exegesis as Bourbon seems to imply. In order to restore facticity to the text, the text itself must mean something, and we must be able to interpret it hermeneutically. It is with this possibility that the last category, my conclusion, is concerned.

8: Exegesis: Giving *Finnegans Wake* its Edge

The impasse of *Finnegans Wake* is the impasse between the openness of interpretation and its end. Between, in other words, hermeneutics as a genuinely factual interpretation of a text against the background of the world it interprets and is interpreted from, or hermeneutics as empty manipulation of signification. This difficulty is one inherent to the process of interpretation in general, of course, but *Finnegans Wake* presents itself as a limit-case through its incredible complexity on all three of the planes of immanence between which hermeneutics operates. The specific question related to the interpretation of *Finnegans Wake* is how to open its meaning enough that it becomes a factual text rather than factual object, yet let it maintain its “edge.”

Edge, in this context standing for its ability to disrupt our experience of reading and bestow the type of anxiety that can emerge in the face of its overwhelming complexity combined with the possibility of understanding it in a more global sense. The challenge of *Finnegans Wake* criticism is to walk this line between total reification (factuality) and over-reading to the point of ungrounded “infinite semiosis.” Both of these types of readings negate the possibility of experiencing the book as sublime, or of the related experience of world-disclosing *Angst*.

A solution to this impasse is exemplified by John Bishop’s *Joyce’s Book of the Dark*, which, while providing a cohesive reading of the book as a whole, does so through a strategy of cramming almost every sentence in his critical work with seemingly decontextualized words from the *Wake* to the point where his writing resembles a pastiche of the text commenting on itself. Bishop describes his method in a passage anticipating potential criticism, writing:

Long before now, the reader will perhaps have objected that the kind of reading by which even one paragraph of *Finnegans Wake* has been made to yield sense has licensed me to lift quotations from all over the book, ripping single words out of context and attributing to the *Wake*’s sleeping hero phrases that ostensibly bear on other characters; or that this kind of reading has required a flagrant abandonment of sequential progression along the printed line and instead has cultivated sense by a broad-ranging and digressive association whose only limits have been the covers of the book and the terms contained inside it. (305)

From this self-description it seems as though Bishop has fallen prey, at least as far as facticity is concerned, to the transcendent and ungrounded side of the problem, skipping through the book and lifting lines at will, allowing the book to slip from potential facticity into a series of what Schufreider calls poetic operations, merely highlighting the word. He defends himself against this interpretation through a structural and thematic appeal to the book’s oneiric subject matter: “To the objection that terms have been taken out of context the obvious reply is that they *are* the context: as dreams only happen in sleep, which is their condition, so the *Wake* only unfolds in the reconstructed night” (305–306). This understanding of words as context is, I believe, a very

particular feature of *Finnegans Wake* criticism, and one which provides an interesting response not only to potential critics of Bishop's method, but as a potential reversal of the *Wake*'s potential for underlining facticity. Bishop's use of individual words from throughout the text highlights the possibility of reading the *Wake* in a genuinely interpretive manner, and taking these words as their own context means that this interpretability is founded on the very thrownness and irreducible contextual situation of those words. This is an example of a textual demonstration of facticity that might be unique to *Finnegans Wake* criticism. Bishop continues his methodological defense by writing:

As for the objection that the words and traits of seemingly independent "characters" like Shaun have been misattributed to HCE, it will help to recall that Joyce said "there [were] no characters" in *Finnegans Wake*, where all "traits featuring the *chiaroscuro* coalesce, their contrarities eliminated, in one stable somebody." (306)

This is an argument for a different sort of facticity, one which both serves to reduce the novelistic multiple discourses of the text to a grounded monolithic whole while allowing this whole to speak in an open and interpretable manner.

A very different perspective on character differentiation and the possibility of factual interpretations of the *Wake* is provided by the abovementioned Finn Fordham in his *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake*. I will again let the author describe his methodology:

This study has taken local areas of the textual forest (about two per cent of the whole), and has microscopically traced how they expanded from their earliest emergence to their fully grown final form. [...] The passages and the methods I've chosen might appear to be strong on character [...] [which] serves as a means to characterize Joyce's manner of composition: for Joyce's characters can be seen to embody principles of the various processes of writing and rewriting. (217)

In variance with Bishop's approach, the *characters* of the *Wake* are here taken as the grounding principles, embodying facticity in their *differentiations*, patiently traced by Fordham through the drafts and notes leading to the final text. Fordham traces the characters' development through

access to genetic material, letting their composition and development stand in for their creator's plane of immanence. Fordham writes:

An intention can be ascribed to Joyce's composition processes, as I map and trace these processes. Intention produces processes, and as these processes develop new intentions are produced. My method has not been attached to a specific topic or theme, the appearance of which I have then traced through the novel. It has instead been attached to specific textual excerpts, in the way that reading groups of *Finnegans Wake* often are, and these excerpts have been read using a "genetic linearity." This linear approach, in the dialogic proliferation of allusion and detail that it throws up, communicates the non-linearity of the text more compellingly, I would argue, than a non-linear approach that is thematic and which stays within the limits of its theme—even should the theme itself be "non-linearity". (242)

This amounts to an excellent explanation of the possibility of the interface between the three planes, if immanence is being leveraged to highlight facticity rather than efface it. Fordham's close examination of a small percentage of the text from which he draws large conclusions seems to be a version of the very non-factual idea of any individual moment in the *Wake* being interpretable in terms of the whole; however, by using Joyce's writerly intentions and processes, as documented by genetic evidence, Fordham grounds his interpretation in both the thrownness of the characters into their textual world, as well as the thrownness of Joyce as writerly being. This thrownness is properly factual in that it both guarantees and limits the possibility of interpretation. The character's thrown immersion in the world of the text, and Joyce's thrown immersion in the world from which he draws the material for the text describe a two-tier model of the disclosive properties of worlds. The world of the text discloses the intentions of the author (in the case of Fordham, this text includes the notes and drafts of the *Wake*), but these intentions are disclosed only within the particular world of the textual reading that these intentions help build.

Fordham's model of interpretation, influenced by the venerable institution of *Finnegans Wake* reading groups, brings me to a point made by Carolyn Butcher in her dissertation "*Wake-*

ing the Reader: Reading *Finnegans Wake*,” where she discusses the difficult question of where, in the reading of *Finnegans Wake*, lies the pleasure of the text. One of her central points is developed by quoting Homi Bhabha regarding the anxiety familiar to readers of the *Wake* that comes from the reading subject’s experience of being the object of one’s own reading: which is a necessary corollary of a genuinely factual interpretive experience (31). Butcher describes how readers experience either “bad” anxiety: the feeling of being “abused” by the text, or the “good” or auspicious anxiety that comes from a genuine reflective engagement with the text. The idea of Bhabha’s that spurred this observation has its roots in the passage from *Being and Time* I have quoted in my chapter on phenomenology, but I will reproduce it here. Heidegger writes:

[...] as a state-of-mind, anxiousness is a basic kind of Being-in-the-world. Here the disclosure and the disclosed are existentially selfsame in such a way that in the latter the world has been disclosed as world, and Being-in has been disclosed as potentiality-for-Being which is individualized, pure, and thrown; this makes plain that with the phenomenon of anxiety a distinctive state-of-mind has become a theme for Interpretation. Anxiety individualizes Dasein and thus discloses it as ‘solus ipse’. But this existential ‘solipsism’ is so far from the displacement of putting an isolated subject-Thing into the innocuous emptiness of a worldless occurring, that in an extreme sense what it does is precisely to bring Dasein face to face with itself as Being-in-the-world”. (233)

This is exactly the type of “good” or auspicious anxiety that Butcher described—not at all paranoid or solipsistic, but spurring a sense of oneself as worlded, as belonging more to the world in which one is thrown and from which one interprets. It is important to understand Butcher’s description of the negative side of this experience as more than just the familiar sensation of either dissatisfaction or dislike of a text, however. An experience very specific to *Finnegans Wake*, this anxiety often manifests itself in terms of the question of whether or not the text, and our reading of it, contains any value or purpose. After all what could the unraveling of the text provide in terms of insight? For some (such as Bourbon) there is no value besides the experience of determining the book’s nonsense, but even more optimistic readers are forced to

confront anxiousness about the meaning and purpose of both the text itself and their experience of reading it. Derrida expressed some of his anxieties with the question “Can one pardon this hypermnesia which *a priori* indebts you, and in advance inscribes you in the book you are reading?”, but Derrida is responding as a *writer*, and for many responding as readers, this enveloping is harder to pardon. (“Two words for Joyce”, 147) Returning to the Foucault quote that opened this chapter, we can think of the reader’s anxiety in terms of the wish to perceive “a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it” (*Discourse on Language*, 251). Just like Derrida’s *a priori* debt created by the all-enveloping nature of the *Wake*, the urge to perceive this voice also an urge to understand it, to have the world disclosed to us as soon as we are thrown into it. *Finnegans Wake* envelops us in a world of language, but the work required to hear the “nameless voice” and understand the language, is long and filled with doubt. Although, as Derrida suggests, this world can eventually be a disclosing one, and leave us in debt to its ability to interpret a world beyond its own, it still sets us on edge, and fills us with anxiety as to whether this will ever occur. We can clearly link this anxiety back to Casey’s line regarding edgeworks, which I will quote again in full:

By the time we designate something as “art,” it has lost its disruptive presence, its radical novelty, its challenge to our usual modes of classification, starting with those that belong to what we call “aesthetics,” that is the codification of primary directions of art in the last pertinent historical epoch. It has lost its “edge.” “Edge” disestablishes and upsets by its very structure: a structure whose effect is to obscure what is coming and to come—the sudden, the surprising, the new. Requiring a certain fixity in sight or touch (otherwise it could not serve as an edge at all), it opens onto what is un-fixed in time and space: in time, since we don’t know just *when* a certain event, now unseen, will occur; in space, given that the layout we shall witness is yet unknown and can take many forms, none of them wholly predictable. Any situation or thing with such powers of concealment is apt to make us “edgy”—to put us “on edge” as we say revealingly in English. (273–274)

The *Wake* can be mapped, in its formal characteristics, to the lexicon of conceptual terminology

associated with the Kantian mathematical sublime fairly easily. As a “limit text” it is obviously concerned with, and directs the concern of the reader toward, issues of magnitude and microcosm/macrocosm differentials, as well as engaging with the type of good and/or bad infinity generated through the repetition of details and correspondences and the cyclical nature of the text. What the *Wake* needs criticism for is the ability to impart to its readers a real *sense* of the sublime. To make them feel anxious and awed, to induce a sense of being-in-the-world that seems to be subsumed by the world of the text as well as required for reading it. There are many examples of readings of the *Wake* which do not do any of this, which instead treat it as a factual object, or merely burrow so closely into its specifics as to preclude any possibility of the “supersensible” grasp of the whole, but those few that do, notably Bishop’s and Fordham’s text, do it through interpretive strategies the merits of which should extend beyond the *Finnegans Wake* community. The questioning of the value of the text, our ability to interpret it, or the value of such an endeavor, comes from this experience of being on the outer edge of something we cannot fully grasp, being spoken to by a voice we cannot fully understand, and the strategies of *Wake* criticism are formal responses to this hermeneutic situation.

Another lesson from *Finnegans Wake* criticism is that every work which treats the *Wake* merely as a limit example to serve some philosophical or theoretical point ends up treating it like a monolithic factual object. This is a critical gesture which imbues the text with a certain interesting fixity and objectivity that is attractive from an “objet d’art” perspective, but the close, patient work of scholars like Finn Fordham, John Bishop, and the scholars (genetic or otherwise) who accept the work in its thrownness and work from the conditions which that thrownness guarantees and enforces the limits of, those are the scholars which, in Edward Casey’s terms, give *Finnegans Wake* its edge, and open it in up in unfixed time and space. Although in some

ways this paper belongs to the first category, in that I am treating the *Wake* as a limit case, I am also trying to demonstrate that the work's efficiency as a model, not an object lesson.

My suggested union of the *Angst* of Heidegger with the awe/fear differential of the mathematical sublime becomes conceptually viable in relation to the experience of *Finnegans Wake*, and is illuminated by the details of how people go about reading that text. This is a "model" in the sense that the critical terms (the sublime, facticity, anxiety, etc.) are detached from the monolithic wholes of Kantian or Heideggerian philosophy and attached instead to *Finnegans Wake* in a manner that aims to undermine the possibility of treating *it* like a monolithic whole. My use of these concepts should reflect on aspects of their philosophical origins, but only in ways which serve to illuminate the non-monolithic natures of those origins. *Finnegans Wake* can be considered sublime, and the experience of this sublimity can be related to the world-disclosive experience of *Angst*, but these terms function within a model particular to this philosophical/literary conceptual interaction. With this model, and all of its related critical manifestations in mind, we can briefly return to a reading of the Shem the Penman section with which this chapter began.

Conclusions: *Mise en abyme* and Strange Loops

As quoted above, Margot Norris's reading of the Shem the Penman chapter of the *Wake* asserts that the chapter "revisits the problematic of artistic autonomy through the trope of self-reflexivity and self-portraiture in whose name he stepped into modernism with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (68). Not quoted above is her next assertion, that:

He now abandons aesthetic theory for reasons that David Carroll's introduction to Foucault makes compellingly clear when he relates the trope of the infinite regress of mirrors, the *mise en abyme* of art, to ideological maneuvers that lead artistic self-reflexivity, and cotemporary theory grounded in its rhetoric, to negate

history:

“For these reasons, the *mise en abyme* has largely been considered a tool of formalist critics used to ensure the purity of the literary and to exclude the extra-literary from having any significant impact on literary texts. In other words, in contemporary theory, the *mise en abyme* has almost always been the sign of literary or aesthetic closure and a denial of the impact of the historical, socio-political, and philosophical contexts of literature and art.” (Carroll, Qtd. in Norris, 68–69)

Norris goes on to link the figure of the *mise en abyme*'s exclusionism and formalism to the opening passage of *Ulysses*, where Mulligan holds up the “cracked looking glass” to Stephen. For Norris, this scene, with its references to Shakespeare's Caliban and Oscar Wilde's remark that “The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass” (*Picture of Dorian Gray*, 5), is emblematic of the *mise en abyme* in art and its movement towards hermetic and de-historicised art:

Mulligan's gesture, however Wildean, is an aggressive gesture, as he flourishes his critical mirror into the face of the Irish artist along with Wilde's Shakespearean trope that makes the full and empty mirrors of realism and romanticism the *mise en abyme* of art determined to interiorize (and conversely de-exteriorize) its own history. (Norris, 69)

Norris's reading of the Shem chapter emphasizes its auto-critique, its tendency to self-parody, its ability to “retroactively awaken in [Joyce's] earlier texts the articulation of their immanent critique” (74), and its transformation into what she calls “the sort of counterart that is the aim of the avant-garde” (73). She also, however, rightly emphasizes the contingency and historicism accompanying all of this self-reference, allowing the text to escape the interiorizing effect of the *mise en abyme* and effectively move beyond modernism. For Norris, “Not only is Shem Calibanized, but so is the text, thus disqualifying it from modernistic merit” (72). This move beyond modernism is part of a broader question, which Norris describes as:

[T]he larger issue of the relationship between the inside and outside of art: that is,

that aesthetic *form* at its most formalistic, in modernism, becomes visible here as historicized, and as determined by art's exterior, by non-aesthetic contingencies of historical crisis, by social and intellectual change, by class and prestige. (70)

Norris completes her metaphor of the *mise en abyme* by writing, near the end of her Shem reading, that

Through the crack in modern art's self-reflexive mirror, the representational *mise en abyme* is ruptured, and "Shem the Penman" lets the manifold implications of genius seeing its reflection in the likeness of a servant seep through [...]. (90)

To summarize, then, the *mise en abyme*, for Norris, represents the overly formalistic, internalizing and de-historicising tendencies of modernist art. The two mirrors of Caliban, romanticism and realism, reflect back and forth, creating a hermetic literary world which takes itself as its only grounds. Joyce's literary self-portrait in Shem (and the *Wake*) in general, ruptures this self-reflexive situation and the twin mirrors of the *mise en abyme*, introducing historical context, self-parody, and other "contaminating" effects into modernist literature. This argument, effectively placing *Finnegans Wake* into the category of post-modernism, carries with it a parallel critique of the *criticism* of the *Wake*, especially given her opening quote of David Carroll's whereby "the *mise en abyme* has almost always been the sign of literary or aesthetic closure and a denial of the impact of the historical, socio-political, and philosophical contexts of literature and art" (qtd. in Norris, 178). Before examining this quote, and some of Norris's other assertions, it might be worthwhile to pause and reflect upon the incredible strangeness of an argument predicated on *Finnegans Wake* as the ultimate *refutation* of the *mise en abyme*. As far as literary examples of *mise en abyme*, would it not occur to one to take *Finnegans Wake* as a rather extreme example of the form, even given the familiar refrain that there is more in one page than in the whole of the book? The answer to this question depends on one's understanding of *mise en abyme*, of course.

At a 2009 conference dedicated to the Medieval *mise en abyme*, Stuart Whatling discussed the origins of the term, writing that

The expression “*mise en abyme*” might well have remained an obscure *terminus technicus* of the heralds, had not André Gide, himself a keen student of heraldry, used it to describe a form of self-reflexive embedding found in various art-forms. As Gide explained in his journal; “In a work of art I rather like to find transposed, on the scale of the characters, the very subject of that work. Thus in paintings by Memling or Quentin Metzys, a small dark convex mirror reflects the interior of the room in which the action of the painting takes place. Likewise in Velázquez’s painting of the *Meniñas* [...] in the play scene in *Hamlet* and in many other plays. None of these is altogether exact. What would explain better what I’d wanted to do in my *Cahiers*, in *Narcisse* and in *La Tentative*, would be a comparison with the device from heraldry that involves putting a second representation of the original shield “*en abyme*” within it.” (“Putting *Mise-en-Abyme* in its (Medieval) Place”)

Las Meniñas, the Mousetrap, and Gide’s early “tracts,” then, stand as prototypes. By this measure we can draw some parallels and oppositions, beginning with Gide’s line in *La Tentative amoureuse* that “To make one’s inventions always like oneself is a laughable obsession” (quoted in *André Gide: The Homosexual Moralist*, Patrick Pollard, 301). Mere self-reflection or self-portraiture does not make up the *mise en abyme*, but rather the inclusion of a miniature whole of the original within itself. The *abyme* implied by this inclusion is the infinite repetition produced by standing within two mirrors. This implied infinite series seems to have much in common with many of the concepts explored in this chapter, most obviously the fact that it is a finite structure that references the infinite. Beyond that, we can think of the worlds-within-worlds structure of the book’s relationship to its readers as a sort of a Matryoshka doll version of the concept. In Norris’s conception, however, the *Wake* is the text which *shatters* these nested relationships. Her use of the term, taken from Carroll’s reading of Foucault, sees the mirroring structure as inclusive and anti-historical. This is partly because of a view of formalism as necessarily antithetical to historicism, and partly due to an egregiously willful misreading of Carroll. On *the*

very next line after Norris's selected quote whereby the *mise en abyme* was meant to stand for a "literary or aesthetic closure," Carroll actively refutes this position, writing that:

In the debates over the importance to be given to the *mise en abyme*, Michel Foucault's interest in self-reflexive texts and paintings has largely been ignored. Perhaps this is because many of those who deplore the use and abuse of this concept in criticism and theory are militantly anti-formalist and consider Foucault to be an ally in their fight against inflated notions of textuality— notions which, they argue obscure the workings of history and neutralize all political complications of literature and art. But, as an analysis of Foucault's use of self-reflexivity will show, a critical approach to the *mise en abyme* can, in fact be of assistance in challenging both traditional notions of history as well as some of the sterile alternatives that still dominate so much of contemporary theory—the alternative of text *or* context, art and literature *or* history, anti-representation *or* representation (54).

Carroll goes on to discuss Foucault's first chapter of *The Order of Things*, where he analyzes *Las Meniñas*, a painting mentioned above in Gide's original coining of the term *mise en abyme*. The relevant chapter in Foucault ends with a description of *Las Meninas* as an example of pure formal representation:

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation—of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject—which is the same—has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form. (18)

Under this analysis, the *mise en abyme* does seem produce the type of void of anything but formal meaning that Norris seems to see in it, but as Carroll points out:

Foucault at the same time emphasizes the existence of a number of opening in the Classical space of representation—both at its centre and on its borders—that lead outside the space of representation and complicate its culmination or finalization in the representation of representation. The mirroring of representation in a particular representation serves both to reflect representation back on itself and to

open it up to what it is not—to make it conscious of itself, and, in doing so to indicate the limitations of this consciousness, the gaps or empty spaces within it.
(55)

It can, in other words, serve as what Edward Casey would call an edgework.

The opening in *a particular* representation of either the act or the concept of representation creates a *mise en abyme* effect that we could easily see in the *Wake*, particularly the Shem the Penman chapter, but we do not need to oppose this effect to its historicizing and contextualizing ability, nor to its modernism, as Norris does. If we use the model of the mathematical sublime to approach the “hall of mirrors” effect of dense, self-referential, and overwhelmingly complex works, we can see how they can reference the infinite through finite means, and how they can effect an understanding, not only of themselves as artworks, but of the very process of understanding. If we further apply the Heideggerian concept of *Angst* or anxiety as world-disclosing, we can understand how the nested Matryoshka doll structure of a self-referential *mise en abyme* can disclose properties of not only its own textual worlds within worlds, but the world from which it is interpreted by the reader. A concept closely related to that of the *mise en abyme* is that of the “strange loop.” Coined by Douglas Hofstadter in his famous *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, the term refers to a type of self-referential loop that Hofstadter located in his titular heroes. In a later text of his, he defined a “strange loop” as “a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop” (*I Am a Strange Loop*, 2007, 102). A strange loop then, is one in which, although all that appears to happen is a repetitive feedback loop, one actually moves progressively from level to level. We follow Bach’s “Canon per Tonos” from *The Musical Offering* and although its tone appears to be ever rising, we end up in the same key in which we started, one octave up; Escher’s *Waterfall* depicts an upward flowing stream that ends in a fall back to its starting position. Hofstadter explains that the phenomenon of the strange loop

“occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started” (*Gödel Escher Bach*, 10). He goes on to explain that in these examples “there is a conflict between the finite and the infinite, and hence a strong sense of paradox” (15). The final example in Hofstadter’s trinity is Gödel, and specifically Gödel’s theorem, the strange loop wherein Hofstadter highlights as the statement “All consistent axiomatic formulations of number theory include undecidable propositions” (17). This example, which is predicated on a strange loop because of Gödel’s use of self-referential and paradoxical formulations in number theory in his proof, was central for Hofstadter’s assertions regarding the centrality of strange loops to consciousness and the formation of the ego through self-reference. Despite his statement regarding Bach and Escher that in their loops we “find ourselves right back where we started,” Hofstadter was really suggesting something more complicated, because clearly something has changed in the eternal recurrence of the loop. From the final “a lone a last a loved a long the” to the opening “riverrun past Eve and Adam’s,” what has changed? Does the reader end up where they were? I don’t believe so, because the text has been thoroughly transformed by one’s trip through it, and while the context of the book as a whole feeds back into itself, the book’s loop is paradoxically level-changing. It references itself, and its author, and the world, and while one might be able to find more in one page than in the whole book, that is only due to the relentlessly *outward* referential nature of the text. The book’s insides strive to contain the outside, but in failing, give us a sense of the scope of the world it attempted to contain.

In a final return to the beginning of this chapter, we can reconsider Foucault’s inclination to “have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices”

(*Discourse on Language*, 215). Is Foucault longing for a strange loop of language in which he merely appears? After all, when Heidegger admonishes us not to speak of a circle, but to understand our thrownness within the world of interpretation and interpreting, he is describing the fact that the hermeneutic circle is not a “vicious one,”—our point of entry is plain. In John Searle’s essay on *Meninas*, he concludes with the following:

What then is the picture of? Not just of a scene but of how the scene looked or could have looked to the royal couple. But what scene? Well, the scene that includes Velazquez painting a picture of the scene. And what scene is he painting? Well, the scene that includes Velazquez [...] As with self-referential forms of representation generally we get a regress if we try to specify the content of the representation. But it is not a vicious regress. There is no way to answer the question What is the picture a picture of? That does not include reference to the picture. But that is simply a consequence of the fact that the picture is self-referential. On the representational reading, its conditions of satisfaction include it. (“Las Meninas’ and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation”, 488)

For Searle, the *mise en abyme* of *Meninas* presents no “real” representation problem, it is simply self-referential, partly because, as he explains, “The painted surface represents a possible arrangement of objects in the world in a way that is not true of, for example, many of the pictures by Escher and Steinberg” (486–487). The *mise en abyme* effects in *Finnegans Wake* are of various types, and although addressing them always ends in addressing the work itself, this does not mean that the work is a void where representation only presents itself, or, as Brett Bourbon suggests, that the book is nonsense and the critic must end up speaking only of themselves. It is simply a self-referential book. What is often lost in these sorts of criticisms is the fact that self-reference (especially of the type found in the Shem chapter) is only one of the very many types of *mise en abyme* and strange loops found in the *Wake*, and that many of them function in different ways. The book’s circular loop is a very different type of self-reference than the authorial type found in Shem, and different still from the dense self-description that caused Derrida to write that “everything we can say after it looks in advance like a minute self-

commentary with which this work accompanies itself” (149). Various models and concepts, such as the strange loop, or the *mise en abyme*, can help us understand these structures, and our interaction with the manifestations of these structures, whether in texts or paintings, can help us understand the worlds from which we view them. This is a circle, but it is not a vicious one. It is predicated on a very Joycean principle of affirmation: the interplay between text and concept is fundamental to the creation of new forms and the new worlds in which these forms arise.

5. *Ivan the Terrible I & II*

A first encounter with Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible I & II* (1945, 1946) is often one marked by strangeness. The form this strangeness takes will, of course, be influenced by one's expectations, but it would be difficult to conceive of a set of expectations that would eliminate strangeness altogether. The film's title alone gives most potential viewers the expectation of an historical film, which it is, but its portrayal of history vacillates between realism and expressionism often, and with no apparent objective correlative. Knowing the dates of the films' production, in addition to their country of origin (Russia) and the context of its creation (Stalinist Russia), provides another set of expectations, but the films do not immediately present themselves as either Stalinist propaganda or protest-films decrying the regime. Their Stalinist context is evident in the claustrophobic hallways and omnipresent eavesdropping and conspiracy, as well as in the shots of Ivan overseeing seemingly endless lines of retreating civilians, counting casualties, or overseeing assassinations, but the parallels between Ivan and Stalin are never overt, and Ivan is still a hero for much of the film. The acting as well seems out of place, far from even the (now dated) bodily movements associated with Stanislavski or Meyerhold. The actors contort their bodies and faces in ways that remind us of classic iconography (the Pietá, Christ in repose, and the death of St. Sebastian being three overt examples) but rarely of common human behavior. Even the score contributes to the sense of unease and dislocation. J. Hoberman, writing notes for the Criterion DVD release, describes it as juxtaposing "two warring themes to suggest the two sides of *Ivan's* personality—the dramatic clarion call of nobility [vying] with the jazz-inflected oboe trill of sickening suspicion" (2001, i). The style of dress and personal behavior, even for a student of the era, raises questions, as Joan Neuberger iterates:

Why does the camera linger on Ivan's discarded fur coat? Why does Vladimir grow a beard? Why are men dressed like women and vice versa? Why do so many

characters draw attention to the act of dressing and undressing? Why do hands, feet, necks stretch out of their clothes? Why do people keep placing their faces unnaturally close to one another? (*Ivan the Terrible*, 98).

We know the past is another country, but surely not as different as all that? Some of this strangeness can be attributed to symbolism, of course, especially with the many images of dualism centre ing on, as Hoberman points out regarding the score, the duality of Ivan himself. But even this most overt symbolic concept, that of the split soul of Ivan, is never presented in a straightforward manner; the dichotomies are never entirely clean, and the reversals and mirror images that proliferate throughout both films are never obvious in their connotations. The dualities between Ivan's infantile and adult selves, his dictatorial and empathetic selves, his sane and insane selves, and a host of other dyads, provide a structural core to the film, but the symbolism and imagery with which these dualities are constructed are so complex and polyvalent as to confuse any straightforward reading, or even most attempts at summary. We are left uncertain and estranged, from the film as well as its creator. As Neuberger writes, "Ivan's visual strangeness immediately challenges us to look beyond the surface of the film for meaning lurking behind and beneath" (98). The strangeness, then, can be seen as an end unto itself, pushing us towards a sort of aesthetic epiphany allowing for insight into deeper meaning, an insight that is linked to the feeling of being overwhelmed. Neuberger understands this overwhelmed state in terms of Eisenstein's intentions at evoking *ekstasis* in the viewer, a theory close to my own suggestions regarding the sublime:

Eisenstein believed that a true work of art contains a tension between highly intellectual, conscious processes and emotional or "pre-logical" response. Everything that makes *Ivan the Terrible* a haunting film (repetition, acting camerawork and so on) provides a tool for mediating between the poles of that tension and ultimately collapsing them in order to create an experience of *ekstasis*. The ever-increasing volume of formal elements can seem overwhelming, but whether or not we can nail down the significance of every single gesture and object, we can appreciate the feeling of being plunged into a strange universe of

mysterious excess, which Eisenstein used to draw the viewer into a dual process of thought and feeling. The thicket of associations seduces us into reading *Ivan the Terrible* at multiple levels, into marrying the logical with the pre-logical, into embracing the contradictory and experiencing *ekstasis* (97).

This description neatly parallels my own suggestions regarding the modernist sublime, and, with its emphasis on the viewer's personal experience and the "thicket of associations," provides some indicators for the specific features of this chapter's concerns. My reasons for including *Ivan the Terrible* are similar to those guiding the other chapters: the film's formal structure tends towards an exploration of micro- and macro-limits of the art form; it has the tendency to overwhelm the viewer or critic with formal density and associations, any total apprehension seeming out of reach; it has the capability to evoke anxiety and a sense of infinite possibilities in its viewing subjects; and the criticism associated with it has a tendency towards innovation and deep investigations into the possibilities of the medium as would befit the "elevated" critical faculties of one in whom a sense of the sublime work was instantiated. While Neuberger's summary of the effects of *Ivan* on its viewers does not use my exact language, it emphasizes the power of the work to overwhelm and instantiate a moment of realization leading to transformed or renewed aesthetic appreciation. What Neuberger also emphasizes is that, while much of *Ivan* remains irreducibly strange even to a critic as erudite as herself, untangling the "thicket of associations" goes a long way to *aiding* this mysterious moment of *ekstasis*, or, in my terms, the feeling of the sublime. Of course, Eisenstein's concept of the logical and pre-logical leading to *ekstasis* does not map perfectly onto the Kantian sublime, but Neuberger's reading of the formal elements necessary for this experience *does*. This synchronicity, combined with the need to interrogate readings that have gone some way to unravel the thicket of associations and formal density, leads to her emphasis on the core critical readings associated with the film.

The philosophical and theoretical implications of the conjunction between the Kantian

mathematical sublime and Heideggerian *Angst* were foregrounded in the preceding Joyce chapter, just as the role of modernism as a *movement* in music will be foregrounded in the next chapter on *Gruppen*. What has come to be my particular focus when looking at *Ivan* is the way in which the complexity of the films is capable of evoking a certain type of “sublime” response, both critical and “naïve subjective,” that highlights the transformative possibilities of complex works—works capable of evoking the sublime.

There are three serious critical works on *Ivan the Terrible*: Kristin Thompson’s *Eisenstein's "Ivan the Terrible": A Neoformalist Analysis*, Joan Neuberger’s *Ivan the Terrible*, and Yuri Tsivian’s *Ivan the Terrible*. All three are superb examples of innovative film criticism (Thompson’s was epoch making, for the other two it is too early to make any such claims), and all three take sufficiently different approaches to make them invaluable companions. At a glance, each seems to represent a fairly distinct field of film criticism: Thompson representing neo-formalism (a field her text more or less created), Neuberger representing a historical/biographical approach, and Tsivian mainly relying on the tactics and materials of genetic criticism. What makes each of these texts unique in relation to the model of criticism they deploy is the extent to which their diverse approaches seem *demande*d by the work itself. This is most evident in Thompson and Tsivian, as their approaches are the most overtly innovative, but even within the reliable context of historical and biographical analysis, Neuberger manages to create several innovative conceptual formulations that seem particular to *Ivan*.

The innovation and specificity of the critical modes used by each critic relate to my proposed model of *Ivan* as a limit text, but also to my suggestion at the end of the preceding chapter: that one feature of limit-texts is to inspire innovation in the investigating critic through the evocation of sublimity. This chapter will be especially focused on this possibility, and will be

organized around the three above-mentioned texts. In attempting to show how each critical work can be considered in relation to *Ivan's* sublimity, I will need to establish to what extent their critical approaches are influenced by the film itself, as opposed to being “ready-made” critical tools. I will first, however, reiterate the relationship between sublimity and critical innovation in the context of *Ivan*.

The Critical Sublime: A Hypothetical Model

That Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible I & II* are complex films is beyond question. What is at stake here is what type of complexity they represent, and what effects this complexity may have on an audience, critical or otherwise. In my appraisal of the three main texts on *Ivan*, I will delve more into the particularities of *Ivan's* formal complexities, but for now I will merely cite one description from each text. Kristin Thompson highlights the stylistic complexity of the film, writing:

The complexity I attribute to the film involves primarily its formal density, both narrative and stylistic. [...] anyone who has seen the film has necessarily been struck by its profusion of visual and sonic elements: there are so many stylistic structures that even several viewings will not allow us to sort them all out. (3)

Joan Neuberger places *Ivan's* complexity in the context of the historical particularities of its creations, writing:

Ivan is a strange, complex and haunting film. Commissioned personally by Stalin in 1941, the project places Eisenstein in the paradoxical situation of having to glorify Stalinist tyranny in the image of Ivan without sacrificing his own artistic and political integrity—or his life. That he managed to create a film of great cinematic innovation, intellectual depth *and* political critique is a testament to Eisenstein's brilliance as a film-maker and his insight into the ravages of Stalinism on his country and on himself. (2)

The first sentence of Yuri Tsivian's analysis plainly states:

Ivan the Terrible is a complex movie—some people even think the most complex

movie ever made—not in the sense that its plot is tangled or complicated, but because to embrace it we need to see beyond what the characters say and do. To begin with, *Ivan* is visually complex; then, it has Prokofiev’s complex music; and the way Eisenstein structures its story is closer to patterning than it is to narrative progression. (7)

Ivan the Terrible, then, is complex in at least these ways: it is stylistically complex; its creation and relation to its historical contingency is politically complex; and it is visually, musically, and structurally complex. These descriptions are illustrative, naturally, of the types of complexity each author chose to address in their book. This fact goes a long way to explaining the overall impact of *Ivan*’s complexity: the film is characterized by an excess of dimensions of complexity, and one cannot attempt to focus on all of these dimensions at once, as each dimension *alone* already exceeds the possibilities of immediate comprehension. This multidimensional complexity leads to the situation of their being three excellent book-length critical texts with very little overlap. It also contributes to a slightly different imagining of the central thesis regarding a work’s distinctly modernist ability to evoke the sublime through its complexity.

Finnegans Wake, regardless of its intense polyvalence, is complex as a result of the intensification of textuality. *Ivan* can claim an analogous filmic complexity, as well as “genetic” resources nearly as rich as those associated with Joyce’s drafts, but there is no real equivalent to the profilmic space in literature, and certainly no analogous political complexity involved in the *Wake*’s creation. While these factors are only pertinent insofar as they relate to the film’s immanent complexity, they are illustrative of some of the many ways in the complexity of a film must necessarily function differently. Another example would be the fact that, while Prokofiev’s score is far from simple, it is certainly not complex on the order of *Gruppen*; however, deployed within *Ivan*, it enters into a network of relations that one could never surpass by, say, filming a music video for *Gruppen*—the score is part of the “text.” This, the essential mixed-medium

nature of film, is a key aspect of the complexity of *Ivan*, and what allows Eisenstein to integrate so many different related signifiers into any one scene or set of scenes. Any aspect of any moment of the music can relate meaningfully to any movement or image on screen, and when the audience attends to either more fully, the other. With these different modes of complexity in mind, it is worth reconsidering the central point regarding the potential sublimity of the film, and some hypothetical effects of this sublimity.

Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible I & II* is an example of a modernist "limit-text" in that it self-consciously engages with the limits of complexity presented by its medium. This complexity, as Kristin Thompson notes, lies not in some "hidden thematic system," but in the relations between the formal elements of the film (3). Filmic complexity allows for a great deal of relational possibilities between the score, the soundtrack, the colors and shades, the movement, the acting styles, etc., and with *Ivan*, Eisenstein creates a maximalist work in which all of these elements relate to create a dense polysemic text. At the intersection between the theoretical uses of the concept of the Kantian mathematical sublime and the Heideggerian concept of anxiety lies the possibility of the anxiety of encountering an artwork capable of evoking a sense of the sublime. The previous chapter examined how the anxiety of encountering *Finnegans Wake* and its complexity could be considered a world-disclosive effect. This anxiety is still that of the subject-to-the-sublime, and the two concepts are, in this context, co-extensive. A subject, then, encounters the film *Ivan*, and, while watching it, is struck by its complexity. This "being struck by the complexity of the film" must be of a certain variety, however: one cannot be a subject-to-the-sublime while encountering a film that seems incomprehensible. The viewing subject must understand the film to a great extent—enough, in fact, to grasp the fact that there are *always*, in any given viewing, elements of the work that are inaccessible. This partial

grasping, combined with knowledge of the partial-ness, constitutes an awareness of the limits of one's perception coupled with the ascendance of the critical faculties: the triumph of reason over the imagination. There are different ways (all at least implicitly phenomenological) to address the question of "for whom" that this formulation necessitates, and in this chapter I am taking the simplest route by looking at the responses of three critics whose relationship with the film can be characterized as subject-to-sublimity. This approach necessarily involves a sort of "zig-zag" approach, as my introduction to their writing is predicated on my assertion that they are affected by the works' sublimity, an assertion only evident *through* my reading. Consequently, I will be as clear as possible regarding the "critical sublime" and my use of critics rather than actual or imagined viewers in this chapter.

The experience of the mathematical sublime in response to the infinity of nature bestows the sensation of the ascension of reason over the imagination, as well as, necessarily, insight into the infinite *as evoked by* nature. It is both immanent and transcendental. The transcendental aspect of the evocation of the sublime, when transposed to art, should provide insight into the infinite *as evoked by* that artwork. The sublime experience of the infinity of the stars does not reveal anything concrete about the stars, which are in all probability finite. It reveals an immanent truth about one's ability to understand the infinite as a concept without grasping it in imagination, as well as a transcendental insight into the nature of the infinite. We can rephrase this in Hegelian terms around the concept of the good and the bad infinities, in that one must pass through the bad (one thing after another) to reach the good (the infinite as whole); we can even go so far as to place it in more strictly mathematical terms and think of how one must understand the infinity of a series before one can grasp the completed infinity of an infinite set. What all of these formulations have in common is the *concept* of the experience of the infinite in the finite as

a precursor to the experience of the infinite for itself. In Kant, the fact that the experience of the sublime is predicated on the *disjunction* of pleasure/displeasure and reason/imagination is a structural trait that all of these formulations share. While these readings are all, in terms of their grounds, very different, the commonality allows the extraction of an “essential” reading of the trait: one that can also be found in Heidegger in the concept of anxiety (and its link to *Das Unheimliche*), as well as Lacan’s formulation whereby analysis is valuable only insofar as it is interrupted.

This disjuncture is, in all of the above formulations, a shift or transition in perspective where something is revealed. This essentially negative construction is important to keep in mind when considering the possibility of the effect of the work of art as sublime, and especially for the assertion that a particular reading (the three critical works on *Ivan*) is evidence that the subject in question experienced the work as sublime. This assertion can only exist as regards the critical works as *representative* of a particular shift in perception of a film, not the critics themselves as experiencing the sublime in their viewing. A demonstration of the idea that the potential sublimity of *Ivan* is evident through its critical treatment needs to be grounded on a phenomenologically influenced account of the structure of the experience of the sublime, not a strict descriptive phenomenology of said experience. The latter would need to involve the critics elucidating their own experience in phenomenological descriptive terms. The former only relies on formulating what such an experience would result in, critically speaking. In other words, the immanent aspect of the experience of the sublime is either suppressed or only allowed to appear in the critic’s own words, while the transcendental aspect is foregrounded through its appearance in the critic’s work. Again, this approach is predicated on a zig-zag approach that could be judged as begging the question, as it seems to suppose that anything emerging in the critic’s

work must be seen as necessarily a result of the experience of the sublime, and therefore can be held as evidence of it. There are two ways to avoid this fallacy, one being the two chapters above outlining the structure of the encounter of sublimity in an artwork and its features (being an antidote to *post factum* construction of the experience); the other being a focus on the importance of using the sublime encounter as a *model* for criticism, and not a basis for a strict phenomenological account. In other words, this approach should focus on highlighting aspects of the work and its critical responses isometric to my account of the modernist sublime, rather than necessarily embodying it. The hypothetical model must remain hypothetical, as there is no possibility or real purpose in demanding an account of another's experience of the sublime in phenomenological terms. However, a phenomenologically motivated account of the structure of a sublime experience in the face of a work of art reveals structural commonalities, such as the links to Heideggerian *Angst*, which would otherwise remain suppressed. In reading each critic then, I will endeavor to show how the content of their work reveals aspects of *Ivan* that suggest it as capable of evoking the mathematical sublime, as well as showing how the content *and* form of their work suggest an affinity with the experience of an encounter with the mathematical sublime as revealed through *Ivan*.

Kristin Thompson: *Ivan* and Excess

Kristin Thompson's *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*, advances not only a superb reading of the *Ivan* films, but a methodology for approaching film in general. The "neoformalism"²⁶ of the film's title originates in multiple sources, but Thompson's major theoretical sources are Russian Formalism, Prague School linguistics, and the Roland Barthes of

²⁶ I will adopt Thompson's unhyphenated version of the term.

S/Z (8–9). She summarizes her methodological goal as approaching the *cinematicness* of film, or medium-specific traits, and although her neoformalism uses many analogs from language, she specifically eschews early Formalist perspectives on film as language (31). Her method is directed towards *combinations* of formal elements particular to film: *mise-en-scene*, sound, camera/frame, editing, and optical effects (26). This emphasis on combinations of elements is particularly apt for *Ivan*, as Eisenstein’s famous montage technique had, by the 1940’s, advanced to the point where he was most interested in the principle of “vertical montage,” by which he meant the (dialectical) relationship between multiple elements of a single shot, rather than merely the juxtaposition of a shot and the following shot (*Film Sense*, 74). Thompson touches on this concept in her explanation of differences between literature and film:

Narrative films do not function in exactly the same way that literary works do. While a novel presents one event after another, a film may present several simultaneous actions at any given moment. As a result, the potential for roughening form is double: action may be stretched “horizontally” over the film’s temporal flow, but it may also be multiplied “vertically.” This means that the filmmaker may create an interplay of multiple actions within the same frame. (41)

Related to this concept of the vertical is the Formalist concept of the “dominant,” by which, as Thompson explains, they meant the “formal organizational principle around which other structures in the work cluster” (34). This concept, while important for film analysis, was also important for creators—Eisenstein’s concept of vertical montage is closely related to his concept of “overtonal montage,” by which he meant a “line” or formal structure of montage *opposed* to the dominant (*Film Form*, 65–68). An example of this would be those moments in a sound film in which the mood of the music dramatically opposes the mood of the action on screen, but some smaller element of the visual harmonizes with the musical mood. Film’s medium specificity, for Thompson as well as Eisenstein, orients itself around multiplicity and verticality. Here she iterates some of the complexities of *Ivan* in relation to the categories above:

Ivan contains a great wealth of stylistic devices that relate to each other to create numerous patterns of narrative associations and connotations. Much of the mise-en-scene is expressionistic, here defined as the mutual distortion of several devices within the frame so that they create similar narrative functions on multiple stylistic channels [...]. Sound-image relations are also remarkably complex; a number of key moments in *Ivan* involve a weaving of speech and music to convey narrative information. Often onscreen movement and sound become very closely coordinated so that once again several stylistic channels seem fused together in a single functioning web of devices. (64)

My thesis regarding the applicability of the model of the Kantian mathematical sublime to the structure of *Ivan* depends on both formal and phenomenological perspectives on the work, and Thompson's neoformalist analysis, while engaging with both aspects, is especially clear on the former. Like Eisenstein himself, Thompson's vision of complexity is mostly immanent to the work, and, also like Eisenstein, is hyperaware of the essential *multiplicity* of the medium. The model of micro-units of meaning establishing a unit of measurement through which the macro-structure becomes especially overwhelming (not to say monstrous) must, in the medium of film, be modified by the understanding that these constituent units are already different from each other on an order unreached by other media. Complexity in film emerges as a product of interrelation between already differing units of meaning, image, color, sound, movement, etc. Speaking of establishing a single "unit" of meaning at the level of, say, the morpheme in language is a much more problematic endeavor. One would either need to advance a strictly correlationist framework, whereby the meaning of any moment in film is established neither entirely in the viewer's consciousness nor in the film *a priori*, but as a product of the two; or establish a language of film analysis by which units of meaning are defined in specifically cinematic terms. Either of these attempts would enter a little further into pure "film theory" territory than is warranted, which is why (besides chronological motivations) Thompson's text is the first examined here: faced with the potential need to construct a completely new type of

critical apparatus capable of dealing with the complexity of *Ivan*, she created a sort of portmanteau form of critical position, borrowing the best aspects of formalism, semiological analysis (mostly *via* Barthes), and new criticism. While avoiding the construction of a complete, cosmological theory of perception integrated into an aesthetic analysis of film, she also eschewed the type of film criticism for which the multiple forms inherent in the media are viewed as unproblematic. Phrases like “several stylistic channels seem fused together in a single functioning web of devices” illustrate her focus on the internal logic of narrative motivation paired with an understanding that formal elements can be analyzed individually while maintaining their essentially connection to a (at least, aesthetically) unified work (64). In terms of the *impact* of the quanta/superstructure differential, this type of approach suggests a model whereby any individual component of a scene, detached from its context, can require a whole other type of analysis. This sort of whole/part relationship between different elements of film can initiate the type of overwhelming of the imagination that, coupled with the ascension of reason accompanying a real understanding of the film of a whole, we call the experience of the mathematical sublime. Thompson deals with this theme nearly explicitly in her section on “excess,” discussed below, but for the purposes of understanding how *Ivan*, and Thompson’s neoformalist analysis of it in particular, highlight this, it is instructive to consider the whole process of her critical breakdown as indicative of the micro/macro differential. In this passage, she highlights this aspect of the film in terms of Eisenstein’s concept of vertical montage:

Instead of expecting the spectator’s eye to pass across static compositions, Eisenstein creates relationships in *Ivan* where movement is a specific device that cues a correspondence between pictorial compositional and musical accompaniment. The coordination of sound to image is not linked to the dominant action, nor does the sound relate only to one or two elements in each shot [...] Instead, a number of formal devices in *Ivan* form a set of parameters that can be varied in the course of the scene, weaving in and out as dominants and overtones. Eisenstein’s analogy between audio-visual montage and an orchestral score is

appropriate; the construction of scenes around lines of color, movement, graphic play, and so on, indeed resembles musical composition. [As opposed to a chosen key providing the point of departure for the rest of the piece in tonal music.] In serial music, the composer chooses a tone row that will provide the set of parameters around which the piece will be arranged. Eisenstein's creation of a complex set of formal interactions in [...] *Ivan* demonstrates that these types of play with multiple cinematic elements within a scene, all relating structurally to the sound, characterize a vertical montage. (256–257)

Besides creating a nice link the next chapter on Stockhausen, this passage illustrates how the vertical montage, understood here in the context of how parameters (units of meaning) can be considered in terms of their relationship to one or more aspects of the scene. Here Thompson relates them structurally to the sound present, but we could easily take any other aspect (colour, in the colour sequences, being an especially easy example to envision) and posit it as the “dominant.” This is, of course, anathema to the Russian Formalist perspective, for which there is always *one* dominant for a work, much less a scene, but in a truly formalist analysis, we should be able to accept the essential multiplicity of the scene and rearrange our chosen dominant in order to create a rearranged web of meaning, constituted by identical elements. That Thompson ends up advocating more or less this position advances the above points regarding the mathematical sublime: that the critical works associated with the modernist sublime give evidence of the transformational power of an encounter with the works. An elaboration of how Thompson's analysis tends towards this type of response requires a look not only at the “form” aspect of her neoformalism, however, but also the “function.”

Although Thompson endorses a more or less Formalist perspective on the *function* of the artwork (in that she does not analyze its function within the world, but its constituent elements as functions within the logic of the work), her conclusion veers dramatically away from pure functionalism while maintaining a strong Formalist perspective. Though most of her work is focused on the relationship between formal elements within a film, not on the film's function

within any particular social context, this is not to say there is no awareness of the viewer in her version of Formalism. On the contrary, she specifically highlights the fact that:

[O]ne of the Formalists' most basic assumptions is that art is perceived in a special way unique unto itself. The ability to perceive a work's aesthetic qualities is not automatically present in a person; it must be learned [...]. The same idea applies to cinema, where the ability to notice the effects of cutting, camera movement, and the many other stylistic features of a film is one that the viewer must learn. The argument also works against an assumption that crops up in various attitudes towards film criticism: the belief that the critic's task is to determine how a viewer would most likely perceive a film. But it is the perceptual experience of a less skilled viewer the most valuable subject for the attention of the highly trained critic? (46–47)

The question of the ability of the critic versus the lay-viewer naturally leads us to the question of the situation of any viewer whatsoever: the question of worlding. If we can differentiate between a critic and a non-critic along the lines of “training,” surely we can differentiate between a cineaste and a relative neophyte. This line of reasoning ends in absolute (and negatively constructed) differentiation that can be taken *ad absurdum* to the level of a single subject at minutely different times. While there is no clear resolution to this familiar line of reductive reasoning, it highlights the necessity of asking “from which world is this spectator watching?” Thompson phrases this question as: “How then can we define the role that reality plays as a background to the artwork?” (49)²⁷. This question is clearly linked to the phenomenological concept of world and worlding, but Thompson, establishing a neoformalist methodology, approaches it somewhat differently. Thompson refers to the “background construct” that the viewer brings to the film, “the structured aspects of the world that the work implies” (49). The viewer, in conjunction with the work, produces a reality incorporating the virtual elements of the film, the actual elements of the viewer's particular world, and the state of affairs surrounding the viewing. This background construct, particular to both the viewer and the film, allows, for

²⁷ It is important to note here that when Thompson writes “reality,” I have chosen to interpret it as “actuality,” as the action of the film is part of reality—merely a virtual part against which the actual may be compared.

instance, one to differentiate between the virtual depictions of reality in the film and those which one brings to the film, based on the actuality of one's experiences. This structure of differentiation, in conjunction with the linguistic terminology deployed by writers such as Barthes and Metz, allows Thompson to provide a reading of *Ivan* which incorporates some element of phenomenological awareness into a mostly structural reading. It also provides the important insight as to where ideological analysis belongs: precisely at the juncture of reality and virtuality, where we can evaluate the effects of the film on the viewer's expectations. An interesting correlative of this is that the ideological impact of a film shifts depending on the context or world in which it is received, making *Ivan* an especially interesting case, given its transformation in critical consensus from Statist relic to subtle anti-Stalinist commentary. Although I will not be investigating this aspect of the piece per se, it is an important factor discussing the complexity of the film.

As expected from a neoformalist analysis, Thompson writes that "The complexity I attribute to the film involves primarily its formal density, both narrative and stylistic" (3). Thompson's formal analysis mostly serves to uncover these stylistic complexities of *Ivan*, but her attention to the differential between the world of the viewer and the film provides an additional layer of complexity, described in terms borrowed from Barthes. Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, a semiological analysis of *Sarrasine*, is particularly important for Thompson's purposes as it combines deep formal analysis with an understanding of the reader as "no longer a consumer but a producer of the text" (Barthes, 4). Although many concepts from *S/Z* are deployed by Thompson, the most important are the concepts of the "proairetic" and the "hermeneutic." Barthes' first move in *S/Z* is to divide any text into somewhat arbitrary units of reading he calls "*lexias*," from which he can build an analysis of how these units function within the text (13–14).

In order to explain how a narrative is produced from a text by the reader, Barthes creates a system of assigning lexia various functions. One of these functions is as a component of a proairetic chain, being a series of lexia whose interpretation by the reader depends on their order and context. This dependence on sequence establishes a causative and (nominally) linear chain of meaning, thereby establishing temporal sequence (18–30). The “hermeneutic,” on the other hand, establishes narrative interest and continuity by creating suspense, mystery, and the desire to interpret or understand (19). Thompson puts these terms in filmic context, writing that “[b]asically we may consider a film a temporal flow of devices, each justified in its inclusion by a specific motivation; these are collectively shaped by a dominant structure. A proairetic chain creates a narrative, with a hermeneutic helping to provide its forward impetus” (46). While Barthes’s text is rigorous in establishing the essentially multiple and arbitrary nature of any such meaning, Thompson’s deployment of the concepts within a film context tends towards a stricter (more Russian Formalist) reading. The use of the concepts of proairetic and hermeneutic codes in *S/Z* is predicated on the essentially arbitrary nature of the division of the text into lexia, while Thompson maintains a dependence on unifying/disunifying continuous/discontinuous dichotomies that seem to presuppose these divisions are necessary rather than arbitrary. When she writes that “just as every film contains a struggle of unifying and disunifying structures, so every stylistic element may serve at once to contribute to the narrative and to distract our perception from it,” she is advancing a rather non-Barthesian perspective on the production of meaning in the film (292).

One of the strengths of *Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* is its focus on the extent to which the incredibly dense texture of *Ivan* contributes to “the narrative” of the film, and this type of approach necessarily requires some level of unifying perspective. What

makes this reading especially interesting, however, is the last chapter of the book, where Thompson turns to an analysis of those elements of *Ivan* that stand outside her analysis of the film. As illustrated above in terms of Thompson's reading of the constituent elements of a scene relating to one dominant aspect, a reading focusing on elements "outside the work" is necessarily predicated on a reading in which *one* system of meaning is dominant. Thompson's vision for these important but structurally extraneous aspects of *Ivan* (which we can imagine as stray lexia), is established in terms of the notion of excess, here discussed, again, in terms of discontinuity:

Ivan's discontinuities of editing and its refusal to provide more than artistic motivation for many of its stylistic devices tend to roughen the form of the neat relationships set up in other formal levels of the film. But even here the discontinuities are structured, creating their own unified system within the work. Outside of such structures lie those aspects of the work that are not contained by its unifying forces—the "excess." (287)

Three important concepts related to the central concept of "excess" are established here: the concept of multiple structural unities, "roughening of form," and discontinuity. The former has been explained above in the context of vertical montage and "overtonal montage," and is important in establishing the possibility of separate hermeneutic codes and proairetic chains within a single scene, but Thompson is not willing to envision a model whereby *any* of these stray lexia may be collected under an alternate overtonal or oppositional system. Rather, they are seen as excessive. The concept of "roughening of form" is the most explicitly formalist term here as, as Thompson explains, "while the Formalists did not come up with the idea of excess as such, they did move in a direction that strongly implied it" (291). The formalist version of excess is encapsulated by the term "roughening of form," whereby the "material provides a perceptual play by inviting the spectator to linger over devices longer than their structured function would seem to warrant" (291–292). Finally, the notion of excess as discontinuity stands for the crucial point in her reading where Thompson advocates strongly for the importance of the excessive,

writing that

Excess is not only counternarrative, it is also counterunity. To discuss it may be to invite the partial disintegration of a coherent reading. But on the other hand, pretending that a work is exhausted by its unifying structures robs it of much that is strange, unfamiliar, and striking about it. If the neoformalist critic's task is to renew and expand the work's power to defamiliarize, one way to do this would be precisely to break up old perceptions of the work and to point up its more difficult aspects. (293)

There are a few ways to read this, as the reflexive nature of this defamiliarization is not immediately obvious: is Thompson's avocation for defamiliarization aimed at an understanding of the film engendered by her own reading, or a reading established prior to her analysis?

Thompson somewhat answers this question by stating that "one reason why excess is so difficult to talk about [is that] most viewers are determined to find a necessary function for any device the critic singles out" (292). Thompson's analysis of *Ivan* is based around motivation, both structurally (what motivates this element in its relation to these other elements of a montage?) and narratively (does this element contribute to the hermeneutic or proairetic chain?), but viewers are, according to her, naturally inclined to read extra-motivational aspects of the film *into* these motivational chains. This is not, I think, the strongest point in a very strong reading of the film and its viewers, but it is necessary to point out as it leads directly into what, for my purposes, is the most important aspect of her reading: the idea that we should actively resist seeing the work as a unified piece and embrace its excess.

Thompson introduces the theme of the value of excess in ways which mirror this paper's development of the concept of the sublime in terms of the focus on discrete units and an imparted sense of the infinite. It is important to keep in mind, however, the tension inherent in her celebration of excess. Her imprecations to resist the urge to unify are essentially self-directed: it is only a unifying reading that would create the necessity for a concept of excess, as

she more or less illustrates here:

I have been looking at film as a struggle by the unifying structures to “contain” the diverse elements that comprise its whole system. Motivation is the primary tool by which the work makes its own devices seem reasonable. At the point where motivation fails, excess begins. To see it, we need to stop assuming that artistic motivation creates complete unity (or that its failure to do so somehow constitutes a fault). There are at least four ways in which the material of the film exceeds motivation. (294)

These four ways are all variations on the theme of the infinite possibilities of form. The first way in which material exceeds motivation, according to Thompson, is that while a formal device may be justified (motivated by) narrative function, that function does not dictate or relate to “*the specific form that individual element will take*” (294). She provides as one example the fact that, while camera placement might be strongly motivated by narrative function, given the “infinite number of points in space” the *exact* placement of the camera will always be in excess of narrative demand (294). In other words, the available infinity of spatial coordinates, or alternatively, the availability of spatial forms (in costume choices, to take her example) prevents any direct *necessity* of correspondence between an actual chosen form or spatial placement in the profilmic space with narratively motivated demands. Outside of mathematical determination of these relationships, only general correspondences can exist: “the actual choices are relatively arbitrary” (294).

The second way in which Thompson shows how material exceeds motivation relates to the infinity of divisible time: “Motivation is insufficient to determine *how long* a device needs to be on the screen in order to serve its purpose” (294). She goes on to explain that the concept of legibility could be a guide for this determination—in other words, the supposed time required for a spectator to take in the objects on screen could determine the time said objects should remain on screen. The problem with this is that “the determination can only be relative; the specific

length of time must always be arbitrary to a certain degree” (294–295). If the motivation driving the length of time an object or sound is represented on screen, any determination of this would necessarily encounter the fact that viewers differ greatly in their comprehensions, not to mention the issue of multiple viewings, as well as the fact that recognition is not the only perceptual aspect necessary for understanding. Even if “the function of the material elements of the film [are] accomplished, [...] their perceptual interest is by no means exhausted” (295). The length of time of an on-screen event certainly *can* be narratively and aesthetically motivated, but there must always be an excess represented by the impossibility of a true correspondence. Béla Tarr’s films allow us much time for contemplation of single images, and some of Stan Brakhage’s films almost none—both choices are obviously motivated, but hardly in an exact manner. Again, the infinity of choices available precludes any direct correspondence; there is always an excess.

The third form of excess is that, as Thompson writes, “A single bit of narrative motivation seems to be capable of *functioning almost indefinitely*” (295). Here we have passed from the *available* infinity of forms to the infinity of *deployment* of these forms. This can come in the form of a single unit of meaning (sems, lexia, etc.) being deployed as a motivator so often that the associations begin to lose their meaning. The effect of this type of repetition is a foregrounding of the device qua device, rather than device qua semantic function: “repeated use of multiple devices to serve similar functions tends to minimize the importance of their narrative implications; instead they become foregrounded primarily through their innate interest” (295). For Thompson, this type of vertical development represents excess in that there is presumably a limit beyond which the single “seme” becomes as rife with narratively relevant associative devices as possible, after which all devices deployed in this same “stack” present themselves to the spectator as detached from their presumed role. This type of excess is predicated not only on

the existence of such a limit, but on the formal assumption that repetition leads to a moment of transformation: the passage to the (implied) infinite. Thompson's last category makes this assumption even clearer.

Thompson's fourth form of excess again posits repetition as leading towards infinity. She writes that "a single motivation may serve to justify a device that is then *repeated and varied many times*" (295). Essentially an inversion of the above type of repetition, the main point here is that repeated enough times (even with slightly varied motivators), a sign somehow changes its meaning. What this change means is somewhat confused in Thompson's account, as she first claims that, through repetition, "the device may [come to] far outweigh its original motivation and take on an importance greater than its narrative or compositional function would seem to warrant" (295). However, as she elaborates on the example of the bird motif introduced in the coronation scene, she ends up concluding that by the end of the many appearances of this motif, she is "hard put to assign it any function at all" (295). This account seems to be contradictory, as it first ascribes importance and then no function, but this is only if we assume function and importance are equivalent. While much of Thompson's text might suggest that, her conclusion ends up championing much the opposite perspective.

Thompson's final examples of excess in *Ivan* are the shift to colour in Part II, and the use of two identical shots in the coronation sequence in Part I and the fiery furnace section of II. She writes:

In the latter case, we can logically recuperate the repetition by positing that the device simply fits in with all the other parallels between these two scenes; nevertheless, the two shots stand out as disturbing elements because we know they are physically the *same* shots—they violate our expectations about the temporal distinctness of the two scenes. (300)

This type of repetition seems to belong to an entirely different type of excess: that of the non-

identity of the repeated same. As observed above, all of Thompson's types of excess engage with the concept of implied infinity. The first two types relate to the infinity of available forms, and the last two to the infinity of repetition with these forms. The example of the shift to colour is an extreme example of the first category, as it not only highlights an arbitrariness of form already implied through, say, multiple camera angles, it also introduces *an entirely new nexus*, that of colour, around which a position might be said to be more or less arbitrary. The dichotomy of colour/black & white is introduced in a moment, along with the range of choices represented by the colours themselves. The mere *possibility* of colour represents an infinite spectrum of choice, and while the rich symbolic texture of the colours of this section is clearly internally motivated, the brute fact of the introduction of colour carries with it a narrative uncertainty far beyond, say, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), wherein introduction of colour, although shocking, is deeply, and obviously motivated by narrative needs.

Thompson's second example, that of the reuse of identical shots, belongs to her last category, that of the repetition of forms. Both of the last types of formal excess relate to the innate link to the infinite implied by any repetitive series, but the specific example of the reused shot functions somewhat differently than, for example, the repetitive symbolic use of the bird motif. In the latter, the implication or index to infinity is oriented entirely around the limits of the viewing subject, as there cannot actually be an infinite reuse of a symbol. Rather, the exhaustion of the spectator signals a limit beyond which a symbol can fulfill its primary function for the spectator. The reuse of *exactly the same shot* signifies something slightly different, as it seems to suggest an infinity of possibilities immanent to the film, without the need of a spectator to become exhausted by repetition and give in to the sense of the same. If a shot can reappear and be irrevocably other, what governs the flow of time within a film? That this question *can* be

asked with regards to the structure of the film, in the absence of specific spectators with limits of perception, shows that it is a slightly different sort of excess, but the question becomes more interesting when focus is shifted to its *effect*. Thompson phrases it this way, focusing on how this repetition violates our expectations of temporal distinctness, and goes on to conclude that, as a critic, all she can accomplish is an *indication* of the moments of excess, asserting that “a systematic analysis is impossible” (300).

Systematic analysis is, of course, the entire motivation and guiding force behind Thompson’s groundbreaking analysis of *Ivan*, so it is remarkable that in this, her concluding chapter, she goes on to advocate for the utmost importance of the arbitrary and the excessive in not only film itself, but the habits of critics and spectators of film. Her analysis of excess in film, and in *Ivan* in particular, ends up as an argument for its transformative powers. It is in this context that the two themes of this chapter come together: Thompson’s neoformalist analysis of *Ivan* highlights many of the formal features associated with the mathematical sublime—complexity, the differential between small units of expression, a concern with limits of expression, the impossibility of grasping the whole in the imagination, but the possibility of grasping it in reason and therefore being able to speak of the film as a whole. These are all important features of a work whose form corresponds to the model suggested by the Kantian mathematical sublime, as well as providing a context for the viewer anxiety I have associated with Heideggerian *Angst*, but it is not, as such, an argument for any particular sublime *effect*. This changes in the very end of Thompson’s book, as she argues that the very excess of the film, the elements which *escape* her analysis, can have a transformative power not only on the way a viewer watches the film, but even how they understand narrative in general. It is here that we can see the possibility of *Ivan* not only as structurally related to a model of the mathematical

sublime, but capable of *evoking* a response, of changing one's perspective. This shift can be understood here in terms of the ascension of reason over the imagination in the Kantian sublime as well as the world-disclosing anxiety of Heidegger. Thompson's argument is all the more interesting coming at the end of a text focused on structure and the possibilities of neoformalism, and I will quote her at length as she explains the value of excess in *Ivan*, an explanation making up the last three paragraphs of her *Ivan the Terrible*:

Beyond renewing the perceptual freshness of the work, it suggests a different way of watching and listening to a film. It offers one potential way to avoid the traditional, conventionalized views of what film structure and narrative should be [...]. Spectators need not assume that the entire film consists only of the unified system of structures we call form and style; they need not assume that film is a means of communication between artist and audience. Hence the spectator will not go to a film expecting to discern what it is "trying to say," or to try and reassemble its parts into some assumed, preordained whole.

Similarly, an awareness of excess may help to change the status of narrative in general for the viewer. One of the great limitations for the viewer in our culture has been the attitude that film equals narrative and that the entertainment consists wholly of an "escapism" inherent in the plot. Such belief limits the spectator's participation to understanding only the chain of causes and effects. [...] The viewer may be capable of understanding the narrative but has no context in which to place that understanding because the underlying arbitrariness of the narrative is hidden by structures of motivation and naturalization. [...]

Once the narrative is seen as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structure are as they are. [...] [T]he work becomes a perceptual field of structures that the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects. [...] Obviously there is no completely free viewing situation; we are always guided by our knowledge and cultural tradition. But a perception of a film that includes its excess implies an awareness of the structures [...] at work in the film, since excess is precisely those elements that escape unifying impulses. Such an approach to viewing films can allow us to look further into a film, renewing its ability to intrigue us by its strangeness. It can also help us to be aware of how the whole film—not just the narrative—works upon our perceptions. (301–302)

There are a great deal of interesting features to this argument, not least of which is its movement from the experience of film-watching to the structures of perception with which we watch film. (We could gloss this, a little unfaithfully, as the move from the immanent to the transcendental.)

Considering the origins of this discussion in the power of excess in Eisenstein's *Ivan*, Thompson is essentially arguing for the power of a *moment* in film to "make strange" and effectively transform one's perspective on film, and therefore our approach to film as such. She places this within the context of the neoformalist understanding of film she develops in her text, but the fundamental structure of the revelation is easily understood under other models. In the context of the model advanced here, I would suggest that, for films *characterized* by a very specific type of excess (that conforming to the model of the mathematical sublime), the transformative power of excess Thompson describes is *exactly* akin to the experience of the effect of the mathematical sublime: it reveals a feature of the world through the ascension of reason over the imagination. The spectator's awareness becomes focused on the salient features of the work as revealed through a changed consciousness of how film and narrative unfold. Understanding form as arbitrary is, as discussed above, essentially an understanding of the infinity of available forms. Thompson's argument moves from an impression of excess to an understanding of the infinite to a changed consciousness of film and narrative itself: the movement from the pain/pleasure differential of the sublime, to an understanding of the infinite in reason, to the elevation of reason over the imagination. The result, I would argue, is an attendant ascension of critical awareness in the face of a work of art, an ascension illustrated perfectly by the innovation and insight of Thompson's book.

This reading is still essentially an overlay of one model of interpretation over another, and despite the symmetries, it is important to highlight the importance of the excessive and the sublime in the development of concepts in general. Another excellent use of the excessive in *Ivan* comes at the beginning of Slavoj Žižek's *Organs Without Bodies*, with the memorable assertion that:

The measure of the true love for a philosopher is that one recognizes traces of his concepts all around in one's daily experience. Recently, while watching again Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, I noticed a wonderful detail in the coronation scene at the beginning of the first part: when the two (for the time being) closest friends of Ivan pour golden coins from the large plates onto his newly anointed head, this veritable rain of gold cannot but surprise the spectator by its magically excessive character—even after we see the two plates almost empty, we cut to Ivan's head on which golden coins "nonrealistically" continue to pour in a continuing flow. Is this excess not very "Deleuzian"? Is it not the excess of the pure flow of becoming over its corporeal cause, of the virtual over the actual? (3)

Žižek's realization is inspired by *Ivan*, but it is not *about* Eisenstein's film—it is explicitly *not* an interpretation of the film. Žižek, who goes on to quote Thompson in the same paragraph, leaves the flow of coins, qua *Ivan*, unanalyzed. Instead, he takes the image and uses it to provide an image for the thought of Deleuze. This move, typical of Žižek, not only highlights the reciprocally interpretive relationship between art and philosophy, but also foregrounds the possibilities inherent in the moments of excess, the moments outside interpretation within the world of the film. Excess points its viewers outwards even in its individual moments, and excess on the level of the structure and form of a whole film, in other words the global complexity/local complexity combination characterizing *Ivan*, points its viewers outwards even when viewed or interpreted as a whole. This process is one of world disclosure, in that the revelation of the impossibility of interpretation reveals a feature of the world in which the film was to be interpreted. In Žižek's case, this points him towards an insight regarding the Deleuzian frame he was bringing to the film; in Thompson's case, it points her to a revelation regarding the role of the elements of the film that lay outside interpretation. Although these moments *can* occur in any film, it is important to note that they are predicated on the forms of the infinite in terms of potential form and repetition iterated above. Any film has moments of excess, but few can be *characterized* by it. *Ivan* is an example of a film characterized by excess because, as Thompson points out in the beginning of her book, "anyone who has seen the film has necessarily been

struck by its profusion of visual and sonic elements: there are so many stylistic structures that even several viewings will not allow us to sort them all out” (3). Due to *Ivan*’s complexity, much of the film remains excessive (outside interpretation) on *any given viewing*. It is this complexity that allows its viewers and critics such insight into the structures of excess and complexity in general. As we shall see in Joan Neuberger’s *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein’s film can act as catalyst for these types of revelations even in a reading that is mostly concerned with the historical.

Joan Neuberger: *Ivan* and the “Almost Infinite”

As Joan Neuberger’s *Ivan the Terrible* focuses mostly on the historical aspects of Ivan and its production, this will be the shortest of my three critical overviews. While its portrayal of a real historical figure, and the relation of that portrayal to the political realities of its time, are no doubt an important part of *Ivan* and even of its complexity, they fall somewhat outside the purview of this paper. Neuberger’s book, however, despite its historical focus, also includes a short section on “Aesthetics and Visual Strategy” which, despite its secondary role, provides one of the best and most concise analyses of the visual strategies of *Ivan* and emphasizes a particular aspect of the micro- and macro- dualism associated with “limit” work in modernism. The three major themes in Neuberger’s aesthetic analysis are complexity, *ekstasis*, and historical contingency. In terms of complexity, she particularly emphasizes the confusion and strangeness of *Ivan* in terms of the piling on of dense dualisms, writing:

[*Ivan*] contains such a wealth of images, motifs, symbols, musical cues, shot compositions and editing rhythms that one might be tempted to see the visual universe of the film as an end in itself. But nothing in *Ivan* is only artistically motivated. No gestures, images, objects or melodies are arbitrary or accidental. Repetition is neither ornamental nor neurotically compulsive, and images are not free floating. All the images in *Ivan* are designed to suggest connections and to

hint at significance, but such repetitions and linkages are always slightly skewed and altered. This ‘almost but not quite’ set of connections makes discontinuity, distortion and disruption part of a system (rather than simply disrupting the system); a typical, paradoxical ‘unity of opposites’ in Eisenstein. But while this structure complicates the process of deriving meaning from the film, it does not make meaning irrelevant or unattainable. (96-97)

This description differs rather dramatically from Kristin Thompson’s notion of excess in that for Neuberger, the “excess” is signal and not noise. Rather than see the formal elements of the film as a system with a surplus, Neuberger incorporates two other aspects into her reading: the experience of the viewer and historical contingency, in order to show how even the apparent discontinuities are part of a system. The experience of the viewer is incorporated into this reading through Eisenstein’s own notion of *ekstasis* discussed in the beginning of this chapter. By writing about *ekstasis* as the *outcome* of watching the film, Neuberger emphasizes the role of repetition, discontinuity, and formal density in terms of their *effects* on viewers. While this ends up in a position very close to Thompson’s in terms of arguing for the transformative aspect of discontinuity in art (and in *Ivan* in particular), it is important to keep the essential difference in mind: Neuberger sees this revelation as the product of a unified system, not a fragmentary one. In addition, while much of her book provides analysis in terms of the complex relationship between the historical depictions of Ivan, the historical reality of Ivan, and the historical context of the creation of *Ivan*, she also incorporates the historical location of the viewer, linking the concept of revelation or *ekstasis* with notions of historical awareness:

Formal density and excess emphasize the essential contradictions of life, and show us ways in which history repeats itself in tragic cycles. But contradiction is not necessarily a dead-end. Forms offering collapse, multiplicity and diversity provide an escape from the pre-ordained and a foundation for ecstatic unity. (124)

Again, this ecstatic unity is very similar to the type of transformative experience Thompson described, in that it is built on notions of the complexity of the film and the inability of viewers

to synthesize everything they are presented with; however, Neuberger here argues for this revelation as *historically* rather than only aesthetically revelatory. This follows from her statement that nothing in *Ivan* is only artistically motivated: the historical contingencies necessitate that any *ekstasis*, any link between the logical and “pre-logical,” also reveal aspects of *historical* understanding.

Neuberger extends this type of reading to the intentions behind the film as well as its content, showing how this idea of *ekstasis* reveals the relationship between Eisenstein’s dialectical montage and historical dialecticism:

Eisenstein's dialectic differs from the standard Marxist dialectics in his frankly anti-materialist attraction to the transformative moment, the ecstatic unity, over the product of the union. The almost infinite layers, repetitions and connections among dialectical processes in *Ivan* assert the validity of and robustness of a dialectical view of the world, while at the same time repudiating the linear historical dialectic [...] favored by Russian (and other) communists. (126)

The most obvious feature of this description is the emphasis on Eisenstein’s intentions and the juxtaposition of the historical dialectic with the aesthetic dialectic of montage. While not relying on genetic materials in the same manner as her colleague Yuri Tsivian, Neuberger also depends on Eisenstein’s own writing for insight into his methods and the meaning behind his aesthetic strategies. In his *Film Form*, Eisenstein compared the “phalanx of montage pieces” to a “series of explosions of an internal combustion engine” driving the film forwards (38). This type of description is consistent with the standard reading of montage, in that it is a dialectic driving narrative forwards, but Eisenstein complicates this description repeatedly, showing how the conflict or explosion that is at the heart of montage can come from any number of elements of a shot: “*Conflict of scales. Conflict of volumes. Conflict of masses*” and so on (39). Eisenstein even goes so far as to list some “unexpected conflicts” such as “*Conflicts between an object and its dimension—and conflicts between an event and its duration*” (39). Eisenstein’s stated goal of

“seeking a unified system for methods of cinematographic expressiveness that shall hold good for all its elements,” that is, his theory of montage, must always be understood in this broad and abstract sense, inspiring Neuberger’s comments on the theory’s lack of linearity as well as her statement that the layers of meaning in a shot or film are “almost infinite.”

Neuberger repeats this formulation of the “almost infinite” several more times in her book, and despite its apparent irrationality, I believe it represents an important concept emerging from her analysis of *Ivan*. Of course, in any literal or mathematical sense, the phrase has no meaning: something is either infinite or finite, and there can be no “almost” between the two: vastly huge numbers are no closer to being infinite than small numbers. However, as I have suggested in my chapter on the Kantian mathematical sublime, the experience of the very large can give us a *sense* of the infinite. No matter the finitude of the universe, the experience of gazing at the stars may still impart a sense of the infinite. With a little knowledge of probability and the power of factorials, shuffling a deck of cards can impart a sense of the infinite: after all, it is overwhelmingly probable that the card order you produce has never before occurred. The experience of the Hegelian “bad” infinite of one thing after another can lead to an understanding of the “good” infinite of (in my example) an infinite set. These experiences are all firmly finite, but there is a strong link between the concepts of vastness, repetition, iteration, and the infinite. These links between finitude and infinity also provide us a link between the imagination and understanding: we cannot imagine the infinite; however, the experience of the finite but very large, or the iterative, or the generative possibilities of randomness, or the extending of a series all give us insights into *the concept of* the infinite so we can come to understand it.

When Neuberger writes that something in *Ivan* is “almost infinite” I believe she is relating a type of experience in which the finite but complex imparts a sense of the infinite. *Ivan*

is finite, but aspects of its complexity require us to engage with it in such a way that it produces a sense of the infinite. The always lurking question of “for whom would this film have such an effect?” can be answered, in this case, with “someone like Joan Neuberger, equipped to understand its deeply contingent references and contradictions and follow them towards a sense of the almost infinite.” Despite the historical angle of her analysis, Neuberger is extremely diligent in continually grounding her readings in the experience of the viewer, and emphasizing the effects of the complexity of the film, either now or at the time of its release. Neuberger comments that:

The effect of constructing almost infinite lines of contradiction and repetition is, in itself, multiple and contradictory. Meaning is destabilized and elusive. We are forced to think hard while watching the film, an uncommon challenge in the Stalinist movie theatre. At the same time we are encouraged to move beyond thinking altogether and allow our senses to guide our experience of the film. Eisenstein compels us to question our assumptions about the lines between good and evil, progressive and reactionary, real and imaginary, and to suggest ways in which seeming contradictions overlap. And he asks us to question our ability to perceive similarities and differences. He challenges us to both participate in making meaning from the film and wonder about how meaning is made. (26)

This passage manages to emphasize the experience of watching the film at its release (“the Stalinist theatre”), as well as watching it now (“we are encouraged”), as well as the role of the creator in these experiences (“Eisenstein compels us”). This has the effect of reminding us that the meaning of the film, and especially its revelatory effects, come from the pure contingencies of its associated worlds: the world of its creation, of its viewing, and the world immanent to its screen. The Heideggerian concept of the world-disclosing power of anxiety is based on the moment where we realize the absolute contingency of our ability to construct meaning. Under the hypothesis that the experience of the sublime is related to both *ekstasis* and anxiety, the revelatory moment is deeply contingent, and in fact reveals its own absolute contingency. Neuberger is especially excellent at illustrating the possibilities of a link between a materialist

conception of historical contingency and a transcendental notion of imparted understanding. When Eisenstein writes of Kabuki that “Montage thinking—the height of differentiatedly sensing and resolving the ‘organic’ world—is realized anew in a mathematically faultless performing instrument machine” he is expressing this possibility (*Film Form*, 27). For Eisenstein, Kabuki was the medium par-excellence for “calculating the blow of [a] sensual billiard-cue on the spectator’s cerebral target,” an excellence it achieved through “mastery of [combining] the equivalents of visual and aural images” (27) The doubling of an effect in Kabuki through the simultaneous deployment of corresponding images and sound represented, for Eisenstein, the perfect montage in that the differential it produced was not related to the *meaning* of the image or sound. Eisenstein considered this meaning identical, so the dialectic process effected in the spectator’s “cerebral target” was a resolution of differing perceptive modes. This is related to Eisenstein’s concept of vertical montage, of course, but phrased in this way we can more clearly understand montage *qua* its effect on a viewer. The whole of the organic world is broken down dialectically and is then returned to us, in this case, by the perceptive dialectic between the identity and difference of meaning expressed by the doubling of an “identical” sound and image. We can understand this concept in terms of its historical relation to communist notions of the historical dialectic, to which Neuberger contrasts it, but we can also understand it in much more abstract terms. R. Bruce Elder describes how:

Eisenstein affirmed that it is important that elements break with the Whole (which one should understand polyvalently, as intending the aesthetic unity, the social order, and the metaphysical One) and contend against it, that they engage in strife against the Whole so that when the Whole once again takes them into itself, they transform the Whole. This principle certainly preceded the birth of cinema, but it is important to acknowledge that the advent of cinema reinforced that principle and was viewed by many as providing a scientific (technological) endorsement of that principle. (*Harmony and Dissent*, 289)

The polyvalence of the whole (the complexity of any of the worlds mentioned above) and its

contingency are revealed by art through the process of separating, conflicting with, and reintegrating with this whole. We saw this illustrated through *Finnegans Wake*'s complex relationship with the reality of the world it attempts to encompass, and here we can understand it in conjunction with the notion of world-disclosing. The strife of interaction with anxiety-inducing, complex, and overwhelming art can have the effect of, when our engagement with the complexity resolves, disclosing a different, more unified version of the world of the work and the world in which the work is experienced, and even, as Neuberger argues, of the world of the work's creation:

The *aesthetic* structure of *Ivan the Terrible* is not an enclosed system but is meant to represent and express the almost infinite complexities of conflicts between and within people in such a way that each sensual experience combines to work as a single harmonious whole. Eisenstein's attempt to unify all the diverse constituent parts of a film (acting, speech, imagery, music, shot composition, editing, color, thought and feeling) was an extension of his earliest work on cinematic structure: montage. (27)

The difference between "enclosed" and "whole" is vital here: the work is not enclosed because it is part of the world in which it was created, the world it depicts, and the world in which it is viewed. The "thicket of associations" provide a dense set of relations between these worlds, but not one that precludes experiencing the work as a "single harmonious whole." Again, Neuberger links this sense of the harmonious to the "almost infinite," showing how the sheer complexity of an aesthetic work can, rather than produce mere opacity, provide a dark mirror of the worlds it reflects.

While parallels between Neuberger's notions of wholeness and *ekstasis* and this paper's model of the mathematical sublime are by now fairly apparent, the question remains as to what is to be gained by making the link explicit. Neuberger's book would not be improved by integrating concepts from Kant and Heidegger into her reading, so why provide the link? There are a few

ways to answer this, but the simplest one would be an appeal to the concept of the model: the model of the mathematical sublime's application to certain complex modernist artworks creates a multidirectional link between the works, critical analyses of the works, and the works of philosophy included in the model. Neuberger writes that:

The experience of great art, in which all the almost infinite elements harmonize, creates a whole greater than the sum of its parts, which [Eisenstein] called *pathos*, and which takes us outside ourselves into a state of transcendence he called – *ekstasis*. *Ivan the Terrible* was Eisenstein's last great laboratory for developing these ideas [...]. (27)

Links appear between the “almost infinite elements” and the “good” and “bad” infinities in Hegel, between “*pathos*” and Husserl's notions of apprehension, between *ekstasis* and the Kantian sublime, between Eisenstein's laboratory and those of the philosophers. These links are not strictly isomorphic, but they should enrich our understanding of each side, providing new conceptual formulations with which to understand the world. The last critic, Yuri Tsivian, is an especially good example of the critical study as “laboratory,” as his personal and analytical experiences with *Ivan* provide another set of conceptual links between *Ivan* and the world.

Yuri Tsivian: *Ivan* and the Sublime

Yuri Tsivian's *Ivan the Terrible* differentiates itself from other texts on the films, including those of Thompson and Neuberger, through its emphasis on genetic methods. As with Joyce and Stockhausen (discussed in the next chapter), large and complex works often benefit from analysis of the process behind their creation. This type of criticism is valuable for its ability to both simplify our understanding of a work by providing specific points of reference, and to complicate it by providing a synoptic view of the work and all its preceding versions, imagined or otherwise. Although Tsivian does not use the term “genetic criticism,” it aptly describes his

methodology, which he introduces by writing: “I work chiefly from pre-production documents (notes, sketches, drawings). In other words, what interests me is not so much the film per se, but the film in the making, its evolution from scrawl to screen, as it were” (7). One of the major revelations of this approach is the extent to which Eisenstein deployed painterly iconography in his filmic imagery, and the ways he intended for this iconography to work on its viewers. It is this intentional link that Tsivian excels in explaining: Eisenstein’s use of visual culture to evoke a particular response in the audience, and the reasons this may or may not succeed. Tsivian begins his text with a wonderful analysis of the polysemic density of the chain of associations linked to the thunderstorm of the titlecard (and the title’s play on the similarity between *grozny* [terrible] and *groza* [thunderstorm]) (16). Following this, he progresses through the film using sketches and notes, as well as the paintings and poems to which Eisenstein referred, to show how dense the cultural allusions are, as well as advancing a thesis regarding Eisenstein’s intentions and genius. Tsivian first establishes that “Eisenstein wanted to work on *Ivan* in the way Wagner worked with opera and Joyce with prose (to drop two names from Eisenstein’s Pantheon): giving form and tension to its surface by means of a vast system of internal correspondences, audiovisual ‘rhymes’” (17). Exploring these rhymes occupies much of Tsivian’s text, but he does not merely use genetic material to support an analysis of internally corresponding images, he always shows *what these images are supposed to do*. While he establishes how Eisenstein relied on a version of Pavlov’s concept of “unconditioned reflex” to evoke emotion through cultural (rather than pure emotional) associations, Tsivian is deeply skeptical of the efficacy of this attempt on most audiences (33, 42). It is this skepticism that is most relevant to this discussion. While Tsivian’s exploration of the complexity of *Ivan*’s associations is brilliant and revealing, his thesis regarding their ability to evoke emotions is most interesting here. The question of for

whom a work could appear sublime must be tied to the question of what allows one access to a work's density, and Tsivian explores this in especially relevant terms. Most of his readings are too lengthy to repeat here, so one strong example will have to suffice. In explaining the strength of the genetic approach for *Ivan* in particular, Tsivian writes:

Let me [...] mention a visual rhyme I might have passed by were it not for a piece of paper on which Eisenstein sketched two shots storyboarding the prologue—[a sequence eventually moved to Part Two].

Ivan tells Kolychev [...] why he hates boyars: they killed his mother and humiliated him as a child. Fade-in, black, smoking clouds; the last glimpse of the poisoned mother; then, there follows a scene showing two grotesque boyars, thick and thin, misruling in his name while little Ivan is shown sitting on the throne, his foot groping vainly for a foothold [...]. This foot, Eisenstein comments, echoes the foot of the angel seen behind the boy's head in an earlier shot [...]—which explains why we see these two shots juxtaposed in his preparatory drawing [...]. A system of cross-references is thereby created: foot-foot, lack of power, excess of power. This is what Eisenstein had in mind when speaking of a montage image.

We need Eisenstein to help us read *Ivan the Terrible* because in the film Eisenstein's theory and practice form a vicious circle; unlocking it risks trivializing both the film and the theory. (32–33)

Tsivian goes on to explain how we need Eisenstein's notes to read the film because we do not watch film the way Eisenstein wished we did; however, the real import of Tsivian's final statement on the "vicious circle" is best understood in more explicitly phenomenological language. If we transpose "hermeneutic circle" for "vicious circle" we can see that Tsivian is showing us how the visual language of the film is so innately reliant on the specific world of the film and its creation that we must interpret it from "within" the circle. This question of the hermeneutic circle of the work itself is referred to obliquely by both Thompson, when she writes of those moments outside the system of the work (the excess), as well as Neuberger, when she insists that the "aesthetic structure of *Ivan the Terrible* is not an enclosed system" despite its artistic "wholeness" (27). While Neuberger emphasizes the deep *contingency* of the work, Tsivian argues for its *purpose*. This is not to suggest that these views are incommensurable, and in fact

Neuberger's and Tsivian's books are wonderfully complementary, but it *does* illustrate some of the similarities and differences emerging from historical versus genetic approaches to the work. Both Neuberger and Tsivian show how prior knowledge can vastly expand the experience of watching the film, but Tsivian's prior knowledge, that of the notes and drafts, are much more inextricably part of the material of the film itself. This seems a rather small point, but the implications are important. As Tsivian argues, "Eisenstein *is* a montage image, the physical body of his film [...] has an invisible twin—the mental movie without which the first is not complete" (34). The hermeneutic circle that Tsivian enters (throws himself into) by accessing Eisenstein's notes, drafts, and plans encloses both the film and its twin.

To understand fully how Tsivian considers Eisenstein and the twin films to be a montage image, we need to return once more to the concept of montage. Tsivian describes how:

[I]n Eisenstein's art theory the smallest indivisible unit always consists of two things, not one. What constitutes the structure of the work is for him not A or B, but the difference, the tension growing between them in their twin cell—until the *nux* outgrows the nutshell (a little organic explosion) only to reproduce the contradiction on a higher level. [...] Eisenstein dubbed such a unit as a "montage-image." (29)

The concept of montage as pure difference is never purely formal, however—it is also reflected in the spectator. Quoting Eisenstein's *Nonindifferent Nature*, David Bordwell writes:

In manifesting the unity of opposites and the transformation of quantity into quality, the artwork achieves pathos. It can thereby move the spectator emotionally. "A structure of pathos is that which compels us, in repeating its course, *to experience the moments of culmination and becoming* of the norms of dialectical processes" [...]. As usual, Eisenstein "psychologizes" form, immediately translating structural features into cues for the spectator's active involvement. (*The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 193)

Taken together, these quotations present yet another complex vision of montage and its effect on the viewer and the interpreter. The smallest indivisible unit of a film is a difference or opposition, which in the mind of the viewer becomes a series of "moments of culmination and becoming"

(193). These moments of becoming, in a film as complex as *Ivan*, transform an overwhelming quantity of micro-level units of meaning (*nucēs*), into a qualitative experience. The “structure of pathos” enabling this becoming requires the ability to situate oneself within the world of the film—to have a phenomenological ground for its world-disclosive powers. As Neuberger also explains in the section above, this experience of pathos is also, in Eisenstein’s terms, the basis for the transformative experience of *ekstasis* (or, as Bordwell calls it, “ecstasy”). Following Tsivian, we might posit that awareness of the “twin” film, imparted through Eisenstein’s draft material, might impart a greater ability for the viewer to experience pathos or ecstasy, supporting an idea of accumulated knowledge of a film’s content being a potential predicate for sublime understanding or experience. However, Eisenstein’s own vision is somewhat different.

As Bordwell explains, this concept of ecstasy, likely derived from the concept of the sublime, is “one of Eisenstein’s most elusive ideas [...]. Ecstasy results from the overwhelming organic-dialectic unity of the artwork; the formal ‘leaps’ take the spectator along” (193). Bordwell proceeds to show how this moment of ecstasy is one in which “the perceiver loses any sense of boundary between subject and object. Ecstasy fuses the self and the other creating ‘a feeling of general unison’” (194). This erasure of boundaries is clearly relevant to the concept of the hermeneutic circle, and we can understand the moment of ecstasy as that which brings the “perceiver” into the circle. At this point we could easily substitute “sublime” for ecstasy and show how Tsivian’s explications of Eisenstein’s intentions and plans can provide insight into the issue of for whom a work could appear sublime, but Tsivian’s important question regarding the film’s “twin” remains. His assertion that *Ivan* is not complete without its twin (the film in its creator’s mind) forces us to ask how we could gain access to this “complete” film. Tsivian’s suggestion is that, although we cannot see the film the way its creator intended, we “ought to try

to meet him halfway” (33). This includes studying the notes and drafts, but also attempting to view the film as closely as possible, keeping an eye out for cultural references and internal correspondences. In the context of a reading of the film as capable of evoking the sublime, this would support a theory whereby we enter the world of the film through, effectively, research and detailed observation. This is, of course, a rather staid summation of Tsivian’s often scintillating genetic descriptions, but it is important to emphasize the *direction* suggested by this type of reading: understanding of both context and intent as predicate to the experience of the sublime.

Returning to Bordwell’s glossing of Eisenstein’s theory of ecstasy, we find a very different answer. Bordwell first reminds us that “[f]or the Marxist, barred from religious ecstasy, only art can tap into undifferentiated thinking and carry the spectator completely outside himself, into a sensuous communion with the work” (194). This “sensuous communion,” however, extends beyond the work, allowing the spectator to experience the creative process at the genesis of the work. Bordwell shows how, for Eisenstein:

If pathos is a way for the artist to objectify the creative process, the spectator’s ecstasy in perceiving the work parallels the artist’s in making it. In experiencing the artistic image, “the spectator does not only see the depicted elements of the work; he also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and formation of the image in the same way that the author experiences it” [...]. (Eisenstein, Qtd. in Bordwell, 194)

Rather than a required ground for the experience of the sublime, insight into the mind of the creator, the “twin film,” is a *result* of the sublime experience. The anxiety of being overwhelmed with quantity, with the “nucēs” of dialectical units of meaning, is transformed into the world-disclosive moment of *ekstasis*, ecstasy, the sublime. The disclosed world is given to us as a series of “moments of culmination and becoming,” and this becoming-film includes its twin, the mind in which the film first came to be.

While Eisenstein’s version of the possibility of ecstasy or the sublime as an entry point

into the mind of the creator is compelling, and mirrors aspects of the Kantian mathematical sublime and Heideggerian *Angst* in interesting ways, Tsivian's argument regarding the necessary predicates to understanding still holds. As he explains in his introduction:

I do not think that way we experience when watching a film is impervious to what we know about it. If it is true that our experiences—emotional or visual—depend on our mental set-up, the latter depends on our knowledge. We may admire the child who called the Emperor naked, but a candid eye is of no use to art: the more we know the better we can see. (8)

And of course this is true to a large extent. Although there are certainly situations in which knowledge can be a barrier to proper appreciation (all of stage magic relies on this principle), the potential subject-to-the-sublime must be capable of engaging with the film on a level at which it is possible to step beyond the overwhelming complexity of the parts and understand the whole. In this context, Tsivian's book, and his lecture on the Criterion copy of *Ivan*, provide the best predicative explanation available, as he focuses on many of the complexities a viewer might miss (such as the correspondence between the two images of feet) while imparting a sense that, despite the fact that we will likely never catch *all* of the meaning of *Ivan*, we can still understand it. Tsivian also provides a startling example of the importance of the sublime moment in a story he relates at the end of his book. After explaining Eisenstein's attraction to the theories of Otto Rank, for whom "the master key to human culture was our pre-natal experience," the last paragraph of Tsivian's book relates how a "shattering" childhood experience created the *personal* importance of *Ivan* for him (79):

Feedback exists between awareness and perception, or reading Eisenstein (and this book) would be a waste of time. When, after more than a decade of shelf-life, *Ivan* Part Two finally saw the screen I was eight, vacationing with my grandmother [in Soviet Georgia]. She took me to the film (both parts were shown without a break) and whether or not it was the first film I ever saw, it is the first I remember having seen, though, of course, there is little I can tell about the film from that first viewing. The few things I can glean are: flying glances; the sense of something bad happening [...] the meaning of which escaped me. Visually the

dark spaces I remember as frightening; I also recall a feeling of pressure and suffocation. The only film image I can pin down is from the Last Unction scene, the moment when the silver-bound bible covers Ivan's face [...]. I do not have much to add in terms of detail, but if such a thing as "infantile anxiety" exists I must have been close to experiencing it, and what cause it had more to do with sensory impacts than with anything else. Now that I have read some of Rank and Eisenstein on Rank, it all seems to make sense. I do not care if this sense has been supplied to me by the wisdom of hindsight—as long as the back-and-forth between knowledge and feeling sharpens our perception of the film. (81)

Applying the mathematical sublime to art should maintain the crucial juncture Tsivian's experience illustrates: the link between the subjective and the formal. Formal models of experience guided Eisenstein's choices down to the smallest units of filmic meaning, acting as the base differences that would inspire the viewing subject's pathos and ecstasy, their progression from the organic concrete of the film screen to the *ekstasis* through which we can, for Eisenstein, participate in the creation of the film. Tsivian would not, of course, make the claim that his original, "shattering" experience of seeing Eisenstein at eight years old allowed him any insight into the film, but it clearly instantiated *something*. His return to this primal scene as a critic allows him to rethink the trauma in terms of Otto Rank and Eisenstein, knowledge bequeathed to him through both re-exposure to the film and a deep knowledge of Eisenstein's creative process. The final statement of Tsivian's book is an appeal to a pragmatic appraisal of the insights that allow us access to the meaning of film. Whether those insights have been instantiated through a childhood experience like Tsivian's, or the experience of *ekstasis*, or through an experience of the sublime, the structure of the ensuing revelation in understanding is much the same, and revolves around what Tsivian calls the "back-and-forth between knowledge and feeling" (81).

The back-and-forth between knowledge and feeling necessarily involves the acquisition of knowledge through feeling, or, we might say, the revelations provided by moments of perception that we cannot immediately filter through a given concept or principle. For Kristin

Thompson, the extra-logical or excessive aspects of a film end up bequeathing understanding in a way that even a rigorously formal analysis cannot. For her, *Ivan* represents the possibility of extra-formal meaning through its contradictions and overwhelming complexities. Joan Neuberger sees this somewhat differently, insisting that these apparent contradictions are in fact part of the artistic whole of the film, not an excess somehow beyond it. But even under this view, there is no viewer capable of grasping the whole at any one time, and the film must remain a cathedral rather than a temple: always presenting itself to us as a series of fragments rather than a unified image. For Neuberger, this fragmentation and complexity provides insight into the nature of history and art, aspects that *Ivan* is uniquely suited to reveal to its overwhelmed and estranged viewers through its network of “almost infinite” associations. Tsivian’s image of the “invisible twin,” the film existing in Eisenstein’s mind, introduces another unknowable complexity to the film, one that he plumbs through the use of genetic material. Bordwell’s exploration of Eisenstein’s theories of ecstasy along with Tsivian’s account of his childhood introduction to the film can give us insight into how experience of an artwork can bequeath insight into its creation even *before* any exposure to the materials of its own creation, and how the experience of the sublime can be rooted in the understanding of the “invisible twin.” An understanding of the model of the mathematical sublime and its relation to phenomenology and Heideggerian *Angst* shows how deeply related all of these accounts are, and how they relate to the essential finite/infinite differential at the centre of the modernist exploration of complexity.

What is crucial in thinking of *Ivan* in terms of complexity, and in understanding its relation to *Finnegans Wake*, *Gruppen*, and other complex works of its era, is that its relation to the infinite *only* emerges with a phenomenologically-oriented reading. Even in light of the particular reading of the Kantian mathematical sublime advanced here, a purely formal reading

of *any* work of art can never express the possibilities of its relation to the infinite. This is illustrated through both Kristin Thompson's exploration of the varieties of excess, which were glossed above in order to show their essential relationship to the infinite, as well as in Neuberger's use of the meaningless phrase of the "almost infinite." It is only when integrated into the question of how we might *subjectively* experience insight into the infinite through the finite that the theme coalesces. This is not to say that any of the above texts need this sort of reading, but that we cannot understand these particular themes without it. Without ever explicitly engaging with the concept, each of the above critics posits a model of *Ivan* that corresponds neatly to the formal structure of a work capable of evoking the mathematical sublime. While this supports the thesis advanced here, what is more interesting is that the conclusions of each writer as to the *effect* of *Ivan* on a certain type of audience neatly mirrors the type of revelations each writer unfolds in terms of their experience with the film. The feedback loop between knowledge and feeling can be short-circuited by the experience of sublime understanding, and each critic supports this both in text and through demonstration. The possibility whereby the moment of *ekstasis* (or ecstasy, or excess, or the return of childhood revelation, or the sublime) reveals something about the work and its creation is supported by the content of the critics' work itself and the insight therein. Although this reading has moved between the content of the film and the content of its critical reception, so far the application of the model of the mathematical sublime has mainly been applied to the latter. In order to see how this model can illuminate aspects of the film *not* explored by other critics, we will need to take a brief look at the Eisenstein's aesthetics and the film itself and show how the structure of the mathematical sublime, and its concepts can illuminate Eisenstein's film, and vice versa.

Eisenstein and the Mathematical Sublime

To apply my model of the mathematical sublime to *Ivan*, there are three basic questions that need to be answered:

1. What is the primary or smallest unit of measurement for filmic meaning in *Ivan* and how is it established formally and phenomenologically?
2. How could *Ivan* be judged as “absolutely great” or, rephrased, how could the unfolding finitude of on-screen motion provide insight into the absolute of infinitude?
3. How could a spectator, overwhelmed by the complexity or “greatness” of *Ivan*, gain insight or understanding of the film despite, and indeed because of, an inability to grasp it in totality?

So far, this chapter has mostly worked in reverse, endeavoring to find, in the major critical writings on *Ivan the Terrible*, evidence for the third question, alongside some secondary textual support for the first two. The critical analyses above show that some expert viewers experience the film and express their views of it in ways that suggest the movement of the mathematical sublime, but some major aspects of these questions have been elided. So far absent has been the question of how this model plays out in terms of a straightforward analysis of the film itself, and the fact that many of these questions are addressed in some form or another in the writings of Eisenstein himself as well as influential film theorists. The first question is of central importance for Eisenstein himself, as well as in the writings of, in particular, Christian Metz and Gilles Deleuze. By first addressing the question of the smallest unit of meaning in cinema in the writings of these theorists, and in the film itself, we can eventually attempt to answer the question of the presence of the infinite in *Ivan*, and how its structure corresponds to the concept of the mathematical sublime.

Both Christian Metz and Gilles Deleuze link the question of the smallest or primary unit

of film to ideas of infinity and the sublime. In his *The Imaginary Signifier*, Metz notes that while verbal language is composed of words or lexemes, film language is “a language without a lexicon (without a vocabulary), insofar as this implies a finite list of fixed elements” (212). Even taking a diachronic view of evolving language, there are only a finite amount of possible words and word combinations, while film’s resources for signification seem infinite. Even in the example of *Finnegans Wake*, with seemingly every morpheme in every language existing as a possible unit of meaning, the possibilities of filmic depiction seem incomparably larger, as it does not have any set “vocabulary.” But as Metz points out:

This does not, however, mean that filmic expression lacks any kind of predetermined *units* (the two things are frequently confused). But such units, where they do exist, are patterns of construction rather than pre-existing elements of the sort provided by the dictionary. (212)

Metz goes on to point out that language itself is also “constructed” on the level of morpheme or grapheme, but the differences between the two media in terms of units of meaning are important, related to questions of available material and finitude. From this perspective the possibility of meaning in film is not linked to its relationship to non-filmic reality, but to the aesthetic ordering of this reality. The units of meaning are the “patterns of construction” rather than the pre-existing elements of the pro-filmic space. This in turn brings up the entire massive question of the role of the signifier in cinema, and the relationship between the film image and its referent. In language, much of the power of the signifier comes from the *absence* of the referent, and the signifier’s arbitrary relationship to its signified. While cinema can still accomplish this through deployment of symbols and abstraction, *Ivan*, like the majority of existing films, relies on a pro-filmic space which we cannot help but recognize as some version of reality. The question of the most basic unit of meaning in film lies at the heart of this issue, as well as that of the effect of film on its audience—the meaning it can impart as a whole. If we posit that *Ivan the Terrible* has the

potential to overwhelm the imagination of its audience, and yet be understood as a whole, we are essentially saying that the multiplicity of individuated meanings that comprise the film is overwhelming. To get to this point we must understand how film “means,” both in terms of the formal elements of meaning of which *Ivan* is composed, as well as how these elements function for a viewing subject. While this question occurs in various forms throughout semiotic film theory, it was also of central importance for Eisenstein himself. In his *Harmony and Dissent*, R. Bruce Elder summarizes Eisenstein’s version of the question as follows:

A problematic question that Eisenstein’s theory of cinema addressed, from its origin to its conclusions, was this: How can a graphic sign (or, in his later work, an iconic sound) that, owing to its resemblance to its referent, possesses a natural, direct, and immediate signification, be transformed into a sign that possesses conventional signification and thus can be made open to the possibilities of narrative and drama?

[...]

One view of the power of aesthetic signs considers that these aesthetic effects result from signs’ *lack* of communicative function—that is, from their *not* stating something, as most signs do. This view holds that aesthetic signs have the power they do because they exert a force or a pressure on consciousness—they *do* something rather than state something. They are active. [...]

The question of how something as static as an iconic sign (an element that is fixed by its referential value) can be transformed into an active element is the key question of Eisenstein’s film theory. (280–281)

The “aestheticization” or activation of the sign is accomplished by many of the means discussed above: excess, “making strange,” repetition etc., but all of these techniques rely on the iconic sign’s deployment within a network of related signs, or, as Elder puts it, a “set of aesthetic relations” (282). This is where the initial question of individual units of meaning returns, as we must ask: of what is this network composed? As discussed by Yuri Tsivian above, one of the interesting features of Eisenstein’s film theory was that, for him, “the smallest indivisible unit always consists of two things, not one”—these two things, of course, being the dialectical elements of montage (29). In the context of the evocation of the mathematical sublime, we can

return to Eisenstein's theory of montage and the importance of the dialectic in his thinking in order to ask the following question: What is the smallest unit of meaning in film, and how are these units deployed in *Ivan*?

In his essay "Beyond the Shot," Eisenstein outlines the key aspects of the dialectic of montage and the importance of the dialectic to art in general. As this is one of his fullest expressions of the concept, I will quote it at length:

The shot is by no means a montage *element*.

The shot is a montage cell. Beyond the dialectical jump in the single series: shot – montage.

What then characterizes montage and, consequently, its embryo, the shot? Collision. Conflict between two neighboring fragments. Conflict. Collision.

Before me lies a crumpled yellowing sheet of paper.

On it there is a mysterious note:

'Series – P' and 'Collision – E'.

This is a material trace of the heated battle on the subject of montage between E (myself) and P (Pudovkin) six months ago.

[...] he zealously defends the concept of montage as a *series* of fragments. In a chain. 'Bricks'. Bricks that *expound* an idea serially.

I opposed him with my view of montage as a *collision*, my view that the collision of two factors gives rise to an idea.

In my view a *series* is merely one possible *particular case*.

Remember that physics is aware of an infinite number of combinations arising from the impact (collision) between spheres. Depending on whether they are elastic, non-elastic or a mixture of the two. Among these combinations is one where the collision is reduced to a uniform movement of both in the same direction

That [last possibility] corresponds to Pudovkin's view.

[...]

So montage is conflict.

Conflict lies at the basis of every art. (A unique 'figurative' transformation of the dialectic.)

The shot is then a montage cell. Consequently we must also examine it from the point of view of *conflict*.

Conflict within the shot is:

Potential montage that, in its growing intensity, breaks through its four sided cage and pushes its conflict out into montage impulses between the montage fragments;

[...] Conflict within the shot. It can take many forms: it can even be part of ... the story. [...]

But these are 'cinematographic':

the conflict of graphic directions (lines)
the conflict of shot levels (between one another)
the conflict of volumes
the conflict of masses (of volumes filled with varying intensities of light)
the conflict of spaces, etc.

Conflicts that are waiting only for a single intensifying impulse to break up into antagonistic pairs of fragments. Close-ups and long shots. Fragments travelling graphically in different directions. Fragments resolved in volumes and fragments resolved in planes. Fragments of darkness and light...etc. (*Eisenstein: Writings 1922–1934*, 144–145)

One of the many concepts expressed in this description is the idea that a series or progression of fragments is only *one type* of unit of meaning. For Eisenstein, there are infinite other possibilities for meaning in film, and the type of collision between fragments that produces specific forward movement is only one type. The movement in a relatively simple shot in *Ivan*, such as the three second sequence represented by in Figs. 1 & 2 below, illustrates the possibilities for conflict in a simple close-up of a face. The movement of Ivan's eyes from upper right, to left, and (not included) back as the line is spoken indicate attention to its source, but also movement towards the symbolic shadow of the scepter, the icon of power that lingers on his cheek. The movement both affirms and denies weakness in its relationship to the symbol of authority, as well as creating a purely formal shift in the directionality of the lines and shadows. In the first second of the shot, the shadow lies passively across his face, as he gazes outwards towards the doubting crowd, but as a doubt is expressed, the whites of his eyes create a dramatic contrast with the darkness of the shadow, and interrupt the general right-wise movement of the image. When his gaze returns, the overall effect of the image is in question, and a pattern of movement involving a quick shift from upwards and right to downwards and left has been established that will recur repeatedly in various settings. When this movement first appears, despite being in the first scene of the film, it is already within the context of dramatically directed gazes that seem to take place outside the realm of any naturalistic concept of human movement. The vastness of the coronation

hall, and the clearly synecdochic relationship between the depicted priests, Boyars, etc., and their more global counterparts suggests that we imbue these glances with symbolic or, at least, political weight. When the movement is repeated by Ivan's friend Kurbsky in Figs. 4 & 5, we can clearly recognize it as a version of directed gaze in the previous scene, but we still must search for its meaning in this context.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11.



Fig 12.



Fig 13.



Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.



Fig. 17 .



Fig. 18.

This type of dramatically directed gaze is exaggerated enough to draw attention to itself, but repeated enough in diverse contexts as to lose any *specific* meaning in every context. In this context, however, Kurbsky's glance down in Fig. 4 is directed towards the Tsar, and in some ways parallels the upper right to lower left movement in Figs. 1 & 2 in that they are both towards a figure of power (the scepter in the first image, the tsar himself in the second). We cannot assume that this movement will mean the same thing in a different context. This does not, however, stop it from shifting the way we perceive certain movements in the film. When a rioter is brought before Ivan, the dramatic movement of his attention and attitude in the shift from upper right to *upper* left (Figs. 5 & 6 above) provides a contrast that seems to signify something specific, and the fact that this rioter becomes none other than the "eye" of the Tsar, and one of his most devoted followers, reinforces this feeling. This sense of meaning tied to the directionality of gazes is also enforced when this shot is paired with the directional gaze of the Tsarina in the previous scene (Figs. 7–10) where she moves from her upper-right-directed apprehension at Kurbsky's leer to upper-left-directed love at the face of Ivan. These movements gain meaning through their collisions, tying together two of the characters most genuinely devoted to Ivan's person and cause.

While these repeated movements certainly create a related network of meanings, they are not, for example, deployed within the system of visual-cultural references discussed by Tsivian and Neuberger above. The meaning of these collisions is constructed without direct reference to the rich world of the history of painting that Eisenstein often pulled from in *Ivan*, and while there are realistic elements in each of the above shots, their relationship to each other is not based on anything grounded in realism or the pro-filmic space as such. The eye movements of the two actors are linked not through their occurrence in reality on set, but through the organizing principle of their juxtaposition in film. Each movement generates meaning on its own through the fragments of partial signification in the frame—the light, the direction of gaze, the shadows—as well as through the relationship between the shots and those shots surrounding each moment; however, the unit of meaning is not the fragments but the conflict between them and the movement within each shot. Of course, in the absence of a scientific approach to “units,” we are dealing with a purely theoretical or operational definition here, but one which is necessary for the establishment of a model for criticism. The differentiation between a fragment and a unit is essential to any artistic study, and Eisenstein’s dialectical approach is excellent for these purposes because it allows for fragments at any minute level of detail, but has a clearly established concept of a *unit* of these fragments: collision is necessary for a fragment to become a unit. Metz establishes a similar concept in his discussion of small moments or individuated examples of filmic content:

[W]e are dealing with localizable fragments we have extracted from manifest film sequences. Now a textual fragment – whether it’s short or long, continuous or unbroken into sections, whether or not it coincides with a global unit like the shot: in brief, however the analyst may have chosen to isolate it, whatever the segmentation procedure – a textual fragment is a kind of perceptual block, visual and/or auditory, which has already undergone the effects of this isolation and is *circumscribed* within a given space.

By contrast, the symbolic matrices, the major categories by which

meaning is produced [...] are all movements *and not* “units”, movements which are not contained even in the units whose form they assume in passing. (274–275)

This description goes in two directions. First, it reminds us that no matter how small or large a fragment we have chosen to deal with as a unit of meaning, it is a fragment deployed within the context of the film, and it, and our response to it, is conditioned by this context. Second, any broader, global meaning we ascribe to a cumulative effect of these “blocks” of meaning is a *movement*, not a unit. In some senses, this makes it seem as if the model for the mathematical sublime could, and perhaps should, apply to any film, as the very act of understanding a film involves a process whereby each one of the overwhelmingly many fragments or units of meaning accrue until we understand, by a global process of reasoning, the whole of the film. While this outlook could make *Ivan*’s complexity seem merely a matter of difference of degree, it overlooks the foundational principle of montage, which is at the heart of how *Ivan* works. Taking Metz’s example, we could look at the shots above and think of the glances as individuated fragments within the film, each analyzable alone, but essentially part of the world of the film. In their role in establishing the themes of suspicion and awe that surround *Ivan*, however, each individual glance is not its own unit. The glances are part of movements, or example, part of the movement of the theme of relationships to authority, or part of the movement of the plot, as *Ivan*, in Fig. 2, knowingly eyes a skeptical (or horrified) priest. However, if we slightly reconfigure this reading from the perspective of Eisenstein’s theory of montage, we can better understand the relationship between moments and movements. If, rather than fragments-as-units, we examine these fragments as elements of montage, we can begin to see how we can think *Ivan*’s complexity. Even in these simple examples, the shot-to-shot repetition of the dramatically directed gaze, as well as the conflict immanent in each moment, makes the action strange and moves it deeper into the aesthetic and historical world of the film

and further from the pro-filmic space to which it nominally refers.²⁸

Before moving further into some examples of establishment of units of meaning in *Ivan*, it is important to recall some aspects of our question. First, the question must be oriented around *Ivan* in particular, rather than film in general, as it is an essential part of the model that it is the *film itself* that establishes the micro-level unit of measure with which its macro-level totality is judged. Second, the fact that the essential movements of *Ivan* are dialectical and relational, and that the meaning of the film on a local (fragments or units) level helps establish the meaning of the film on a global (movement, symbolic) level through collisions and contrasts. One of the essential points of Eisenstein's description of montage above is the "etc." at the end of his list. This, in conjunction with this example from physics, provides insight into his expanded view of the power of the dialectic in film, and his goals for *Ivan*. Each individuated element only gains meaning in conjunction or collision with another, but that does not mean that there is only one collision for each "atom" or fragment. The dramatically directional glances that fill *Ivan* serve a variety of purposes, all of them *relational*. The glance to upper right followed by lower left can, in Figs. 1 & 2, be considered a unit insofar as it is a collision between the different concepts in the image. The same movement can be considered only a fragment when establishing the pattern of glances that fill the frame for the course of the film: the unit, in this case, is that glance and its pairs, forming conflicting images that give rise to meaning. In Fig. 11 above, we see Ivan as Holbein's *Christ*, and this relationship between screen and painting forms a unit, just as do the paired beards of Ivan and Kurbsky, and the "Purloined Letter"-like network of gazes in Fig. 12

²⁸ Eisenstein, in fact, referred to this very process of transformation of the pro-filmic space as conflict in and of itself, a description which, for Bordwell, made the term all but useless (132). But, as Elder points out, this is totally cogent with Eisenstein's Marxist perspective: "The object in its natural existence is analogous to matter in its inert state. Labour, the creative wrestling with nature, transforms the natural object into something it originally was not by endowing it with new characteristics (288).

recapitulating those in Fig. 10 with a different triad. The gazes also, however, function as part of a montage effect that ties them to scenes that merely follow sequentially, but contain no repeated elements of the gaze. A classic example of this type of use would be a shot where a character looks to the left, followed by a shot of a hallway which we assume to be gazed at from the perspective of the character in the preceding shot. In the example in Figs. 17 & 18, the Baltic ambassador gazes after the departing Kurbsky (despite having first turned a corner in the hallway), and the following shot is of Kurbsky's back, before he turns around to stare back. This is a very common technique in film, serving to suture shots together and maintain continuity, but it is subverted in *Ivan* to such an extent that the viewer can never be certain as to whether the camera represents any character's actual point of view. Part of this subversion is accomplished through the general lack of realism in some of the scenes, most famously the excessive flow of coins in the opening scene, but it is also accomplished through subversion of audience expectations of this system of linking gazes. The funeral scene at the end of Part I contains many examples of this type of subversion, beginning with the fact that the shots of Ivan gazing down at his dead Tsarina (Fig. 14) are clearly impossible given his height relative to the elevated coffin (Fig. 13). To compound this, Ivan is repeatedly shown also looking *up* at the Tsarina (Fig. 15) followed by a shot gazing *down* at her face (Fig. 16). In this context, it is hard to take even a transition as seemingly simple as that between Figs. 17 & 18 in a straightforward manner, as the link between a directed gaze and the subsequent shot is clearly never as straightforward as a mere representation of the character's perspective. Whether we look at these sequential examples of conflict, or those that take place within a single shot or moment, it is important that we view the relationship between the whole and the part in terms of a *network* of relationships, not merely nested correspondences. The difference between these two approaches is essentially that between

Eisenstein and Pudovkin: the collision versus the series. Eisenstein's film is often remarked upon in terms of his drive to create an "all-encompassing network of motifs," but if we take the view that conflict between *any* two elements represents the smallest unit of meaning with which we interpret the film, we can begin to think of the film as an all-encompassing network of units, not merely motifs (Bordwell, 1993, 239).

The collision between separate atomistic moments or fragments, rather than the fragments themselves, is the base unit of meaning in *Ivan*, and we can think of this unit as the montage unit, as long as "montage" is thought of in the proper late-Eisensteinian manner, encompassing both horizontal (shot to shot, scene to scene) and vertical (within shot, image to music, movement to non-movement, etc.) collisions. The film establishes these collisions as the fundamental or smallest unit of meaning through the tools of repetition, reversal, and variance, as, for example, a dramatically directed gaze is repeated over and over in various contexts and the differences and similarities between these instances establishes each one's meaning in relation to the other. There are two fundamental, and fundamentally related difficulties with this approach: first, it seems to necessitate the existence of a "power-set" of collisions (in other words, a set of all possible combinations of all possible fragments), and second this proliferation of possible collisions seems to negate the possibility of a comprehensible artistic whole emerging from the fragments. These are, of course, purely formal problems that emerge due to the conditions of analysis imposed by the montage principle in general and this specific use of it in particular, but they are integral to understanding the conceptual link between the establishment of micro-level units of meaning and the evocation of the mathematical sublime in this model. The establishment of this so called "power-set" of fragmentary collisions effectively represents the possibility of encountering a seemingly infinite work. Neuberger's refrain of the "almost

infinite” combinations in *Ivan*, while mathematically nonsensical, is exactly right in terms of the phenomenological reception of this dense and expansive set of possible collisions. Despite the definite finitude of possibilities, the sheer quantity is far outside the possibilities of human comprehension, allowing for a feeling of awe and/or anxiety evocative of an encounter with the infinite. The second problem, that of the possibility of the whole in the face of these myriad fragmentary particles, is essentially the question of the possibility of sublime understanding in the face of a quantity overwhelming the imagination. Recalling that an aspect of the experience of the mathematical sublime is the enjoyment of one’s own capacity for reason and understanding, in other words the ascension of these faculties over the limitless produced by nature, we can think of the analog to this experience being the enjoyment of our own capabilities for understanding a work like *Ivan* despite knowing that we cannot grasp its every detail. To experience this enjoyment we must, of course, have first been overwhelmed. We can describe the “sublime” experience of viewing *Ivan* as characterize by being at first attentive to its complexities to the point of being overwhelmed by the inherent possibilities for meaning in the combinations between every glance, every shadow, and every note of the score; but, despite this sensation of overwhelming possibilities, we were able to finish the film (once, twice, or many times) and have a unified sense of it, understand its contours of meaning, and experience the pleasure/displeasure of this differential. The above readings of the three major critical works show how this sense of understanding can obtain even in a reading of the film marked by an awareness of its excess and surplus of meaning, but it is also important to understand the purely formal implications of this type of approach to the film. The question of how the film might evoke the mathematical sublime for certain viewing subjects was, by necessity, answered with the examples of critics whose readings demonstrated such a response. That it was answered first

helped establish the general shape of responses to *Ivan the Terrible*, as well as the lexicon of (often unintentional) variations on the theme of the sublime in both Eisenstein himself (*ekstasis*, for example) and the critical work on the film (Thompson's notion of excess, Neuberger's "almost infinite," Tsivian's childhood revelation). While this established the possibility of a fruitful reading of the film in terms of the mathematical sublime, its order is not a case of begging the question but of demonstrating the syncretic value of model and its architectonic compatibility with existing readings of the film and the film itself as seen through these readings. In contrast, the first two questions in the model, that of the smallest unit of meaning in the work and the possibility of the evocation of the infinite through the finite, are *formal* and *axiomatic*. Given that the grounding or smallest unit in the film *Ivan the Terrible* is the montage-unit, we must conclude that the sense of overwhelming complexity and quantity is a product of the existence of the "power set" of possible collisions between the sub-units of the film. We cannot, of course, ascribe any sort of godlike power to Eisenstein himself, and posit the film as a completely perfect network of absolutely interrelated units. There is certainly a "power set" of interrelated units, but it is its *existence*, not the intentional structure behind it, that overwhelms the imagination. Despite this overwhelming, it is possible to view the film as a totality to be grasped in understanding, and this possibility must come from our ability to comprehend a version of this power-set in abstraction, if not in imagination. In other words, the montage-units must, in fact, cohere to produce a meaningful totality even if the extent of their interrelatedness can never be grasped by any one person's imagination. The purely formal nature of this reading necessitated an exploration of the extant readings of the film to support this conclusion. Given that the film appears deeply meaningful precisely to those critics who repeatedly emphasise its inaccessible complexity validates the attempt at giving a formal account of that process. The link

between the thesis that the experience of viewing complex modernist cinema is structurally related to the experience of the mathematical sublime is also put forth by Gilles Deleuze in his *Cinema* books, and an exploration of the links between his model and the one advanced here will serve to highlight some of the structural symmetries as yet unaddressed, as well as the question of the “modern” nature of *Ivan the Terrible*.

Conclusion: Deleuze’s Cinematic Sublime

Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the cinematic mathematical sublime differs from the model presented here primarily in that Deleuze focuses on a *temporal* interpretation of the units/whole differential central to the concept, while this chapter has focused on a more holistic view of possible filmic units of meaning. While Deleuze as a philosopher is far from reading the sublime as conceptually referring to time *tout court*, he finds this concept’s purest cinematic expression to be one which focuses on manifestations of subjective temporality. Deleuze locates his strongest example of this manifestation in the work of French director Abel Gance and in particular his *Napoleon* (1927) (*Cinema 1*, 49). Famously projected on three screens, often with a different scene occurring on each, *Napoleon* is undoubtedly one of the most visually complex films of its era. Deleuze’s explanation of the mathematical sublime in his *Cinema 1* focuses on how the movement from individuated units of measurement to measureless immensity to somehow graspable whole and applies it to a perception of time (48). This holistic perception of the infinity of time is, for Deleuze, the sublime understanding cinema is capable of granting: “no longer time as succession of movements, and of their units, but time as simultaneism and simultaneity (for simultaneity, no less than succession, belongs to time; it is time as a whole)” (48). While Deleuze acknowledges that even succession carries with it a sense of infinity, he emphasizes the

difference between the infinity implied by succession and that given in totality, writing that “one does not pass from one to the other by bringing into play units of measurement —however large or small—but only by attaining something measureless Overmuch or Excess in relation to all measurement” (48). While this has much in common with the model of the mathematical sublime presented here, it is important to note that in this context Deleuze is limiting his vision of cinematic sublimity to the presentation of *time* as a whole. Deleuze sees Abel Gance’s *Napoleon* as accomplishing this in two ways, one formal and one narrative. The two primary formal methods Deleuze highlights in Gance are his “successive vertical montage” and his use of triple screens. Deleuze here describes the combined effect of these methods:

By superimposing a very large number of superimpressions (sixteen at times), by introducing little temporal shifts between them, and by adding some and removing others, Gance is perfectly aware that the spectator will not see what is superimposed: the imagination is, as it were, surpassed, saturated, quickly reaching its limit. But Gance relies on an effect of all these superimpressions in the soul, on the constitution of a rhythm of added and subtracted values, which presents to the soul the idea of a whole as the feeling of measurelessness and immensity. By inventing the triple screen, Gance achieves the simultaneity of three aspects of a same scene, or of three different scenes, and constructs so-called “non-retrogradable” rhythms, rhythms whose two extremes are the retrogradation of one by the other, with a central value common to both. By uniting the simultaneity of superimpression, and the simultaneity of counter-impression, Gance truly constitutes the image as the absolute movement of the whole which changes. (49)

The evocation of the “whole which changes” is the central outcome of Deleuze’s version of the cinematic mathematical sublime, as it stands for the graspable whole given over and above the incomprehensible immensity of successive moments. Gance’s superimposition technique produces the limit-surpassing effect of overwhelming the spectator with minute shifts in perspective, or temporal units, only to allow for a unified sense of time to be bestowed over and above this disorienting effect through the more readily comprehensible simultaneity of multiple perspectives provided by the three screens. The differential between the ungraspable simultaneity

of overlaid perspective and the graspable simultaneity of multiple perspectives produces a sensation wedding displeasure at the limitations of our ability to grasp one aspect of temporal succession with the pleasure at being able to grasp another, more total sense of the wholeness of time. It is worth noting that Deleuze is very clearly applying the mathematical sublime as a model in much the way this chapter attempts to, as he is clearly not advocating for a reading of the Kantian sublime strictly oriented around temporality. Likewise, his reading is not a comparison between a phenomenological analysis of the subjective experience of *viewing* Gance's film with Kant's phenomenological description of the subjective experience of the mathematical sublime. Instead, Deleuze is merely finding architectonic similarities between an artistic work and a philosophical concept, hopefully illuminating to both. This is even more clear in Deleuze's location of the mathematical sublime in the narrative structure of the film, as he points out that in *Napoleon* "the constant references to the man of the people, to the soldier of the Old Guard, and to the cook, introduce a naïve, immediate witness's present chronicle into the epic immensity of a reflected future and past" (49–50). It is clear here that his reading is not so far from the one advanced here as it might immediately appear, as this is a more analogic than phenomenological evocation of the mathematical sublime. Deleuze's description of Gance and the whole French school's affinity with the mathematical sublime orients around new ways of conceiving of and representing two aspects of temporality: the "whole of time" and the "variations of the present" (50). While aspects of this particular model could be located in Eisenstein, there is no question that *Napoleon* provides a better model for the temporal interpretation of the cinematic mathematical sublime. What is equally clear, however, is that there are other formal techniques and narrative concepts with which we could construct similar models, as this chapter has attempted to accomplish with *Ivan the Terrible* and its particular array

of unique densities. Rather than take the units of meaning in Kant's concept of the mathematical sublime and make them stand for units of time, here they have been made to stand for "any unit of meaning whatsoever." Both models hopefully function as illustrative of aspects of film and philosophic concept, but the differences in approach should also be revealing. Any reading of *Ivan* focusing on its manifestations of temporality would be hopelessly reductive, but, as the three excellent but widely divergent critical readings above illustrate, *Ivan's* density and complexity is irreducible to any specific type of film image, a feature necessitating the broader and more strictly formal approach, as well as the emphasis on montage and collision of any units of meaning whatsoever. The idea of the central images which make up particular films is another major concept of Deleuze's, and one that is linked to his concepts of the modern versus the classical, and a brief exploration of these ideas will provide more insight into the choice of "any collision whatsoever" as a unit of meaning in *Ivan*, and how it, like *Napoleon*, fits into a model of the mathematical sublime.

A key thesis of Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1* is the split between the pre-cinematic, "classical" dialectic of movement and the post-cinematic, "modern" version, in which he includes the nascent cinematic forms of Muybridge and Marey (5). Based heavily on the writings of Eisenstein, he posits two conceptions of how the instant relates to the whole of movement in classical and modern senses. In this conception of the term "modern," it represents the opposition to the classical sense of movement represented by, say, a painting of a horse in motion. In the classical dialectic of movement an isolated or privileged point (the exact pose of the horse) represents the "order of transcendental forms which are actualized in a movement," while the modern cinematic conception of movement is "the production and confrontation of the singular points which are immanent to movement" (each equidistant pose of the horse in Muybridge's

famous series) (6). The key difference is not that there are no longer any privileged moments—as Deleuze points out, Eisenstein relies heavily on dramatic or “pathetic” moments—rather, it is that these moments emerge from, and can be re-subsumed into, any point whatsoever in the series (6). In the modern, cinematic version of movement, every point (or frame, or Muybridge still) is equal to any other until it is privileged by attention or some other act. We can compare this shift in perspective to the radical scientific one that accompanied the introduction of photography. In their *Objectivity*, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison relate the story of Arthur Worthington’s work on fluid dynamics, and the taxonomic drawings of the patterns of mercury drops splashing, which he accomplished through the help of magnesium flashes at the moment of contact. After years of recording his impressions of the shapes these drops made, and attempting to create a Linneus-like categorization of the types of symmetrical splashes the drops created, the camera was invented and he had a chance to use it in his work. What this new technology revealed, however, was not the even symmetry of an “ideal type” like those found in Linnaeus, but the chaos and randomness of the photographed world (11–16). As Daston and Galison relate:

[I]n 1895, Worthington told [an] audience that the earlier images of perfect drops had to be discarded. In their place, he wanted images that depicted the physical world in its full-blown complexity, its asymmetrical individuality—in what he called, for short “an objective view.” Only this would provide knowledge of what he considered “real, as opposed to imaginary fluids.” (16)

An important detail of this story that Daston and Galison emphasize is that prior to the introduction of photography, Worthington *did* draw images of imperfect drops, he simply never published them. He supposed they were abnormalities or deviances, and not worth publishing as “ideal types” like those in Linnaeus. Although Worthington’s revelation occurred because of photography and not film, it still embodies Deleuze’s concept of the shift in perspective on movement, as his photographs allowed him to reconstruct the “real” movement of fluids and

avoid the “imaginary” highlighting of ideal or transcendental forms which he falsely extracted from perceived movement. With these two examples in mind, we can conclude that the modern versus classical shift Deleuze sees exemplified in cinema can be closely compared to the techno-scientific shift in the ability to reproduce and represent movement, one which emphasized objectivity over ideality and the equality of points over the privileged moment. In this sense, Eisenstein and *Ivan* clearly belong to the “modern,” and, in fact, Deleuze repeatedly evokes him and his montage-theory as examples of the transition (*Cinema 1*, 5–6). We can think of Deleuze’s elaboration of the mathematical sublime in Gance’s *Napoleon* as dependent on this evolution from the pose to the “any-moment-whatsoever” and its attendant shift in possible conceptions of movement, but we can also clearly see that there is no need to confine ourselves to his specifically temporal reading. While all montage is in some ways dependent on the differential between the variations of the present and time as a whole, we can see many other differentials at work in *Ivan*, such as those between the highlighted moments of meaning evoked through dramatically directed gazes, and the undifferentiated flow of facial expression from which these moments emerge for the viewer. Returning to the above stills of the dramatically directed gazes, we can think of them as emergent from the network of possible relations of gazes and how they relate to the film as a whole. While the stills above are obviously moments extracted from the movement of the film and made to serve as signs or examples, they are just as clearly extracted from a series of “any-moments-whatsoever.” Even the dramatic poses of Ivan and Kurbsky are part of the fluidity of film, not the static poses of painting. While the images above are artificial and somewhat arbitrarily extracted to serve as examples, they are representative of the act of highlighting moments for importance that constitutes the meaning-making process of watching the film. The stills allow us to consider the system of relations between some of the more *salient*

moments in the film: the dramatic, or referential, or otherwise meaningful moments our attention extracts from the moving images. We can appreciate how the relative salience of any given moment depends not only upon moments which will follow, but moments which come before, retroactively imbuing a glance or gaze with more meaning in retrospect. From this perspective, repetition and identity are the key features of the network of meaning in the film. The collisions between fragmentary parts that create meaning only in conjunction is the process through which salient moments are created, as our attention extracts similarities and differences from point to point within the world of the film. This process is just as vertical as it is horizontal, of course, as we can notice multiple salient features in a single shot, or the salience of a moment of score or a camera movement. *Ivan's* ability to encourage its audience and critics to find such an abundance of salient moments among its visual minutiae is a testament to the density of the film and Eisenstein's attentiveness to the smallest units of meaning possible. From this perspective, the film's ability to cohere as a meaningful whole is a direct consequence of the ability of these salient units (units as collisions, not as fragments) to combine in order to form a consistent narrative, aesthetic world, and interrelated image. The viewer able to experience the film as "sublime" is merely one able to hold this unified version of the film in their understanding alongside all of those innumerable links between salient points into which it could not be subsumed. As Deleuze points out, the evocation of the sublime is dependent on the *variability* of the unit of measurement (*Cinema 1*, 47). The fact that these salient points of collision are extracted from "any point whatsoever" in the flow of film is what gives their finitude a sense of the infinite. The differential between this sense of unification and meaning and the mere *potential* for meaning in the many lost threads and missed connections completes the analogy to the mathematical sublime.

At the core of this construction of *Ivan* as a sort of limit-text in film history, representing a deeply complex and in some ways inaccessible world of references, is the notion of the proliferation of dialectical relationships. Unlike Deleuze's example of the superimposition of sixteen layers of film in *Napoleon*, there is nothing literally inaccessible in *Ivan*, no rapid flickering of light we cannot physically parse. Rather, the analogy to the mathematical sublime revolves around the potential for meaning in the rich "thicket of allusions" and the density of repetitions, reversals, and mirroring that occurs on every level, from the actors' expressions to the movements of the camera to the movement of the plot. While there is certainly *more* literal potential for being overwhelmed by film than by text, *Ivan*'s status as a perceptual limit is still more analogic than literal, while Deleuze's example of Gance's *Napoleon* exists somewhere further out on that spectrum. In this sense, the final example of the modernist sublime has more in common with *Napoleon* than *Ivan*. Karlheinz Stockhausen's symphonic work *Gruppen* uses three orchestras, mirroring *Napoleon*'s three screens, and its creator's obsession with time and the limits of perception seem much more closely aligned with Gance's aims (particularly as interpreted by Deleuze) than with Eisenstein's. As such, the next chapter will attempt to demonstrate how the model of the mathematical sublime can apply to a much more formal structure for a work. Like *Ivan*, however, Stockhausen's modernist masterpiece not only strove for density and limit-testing complexity, but for universal breadth and scope, and, like *Ivan*, *Gruppen* has inspired the type of innovative criticism that seems to mark out the modernist limit-works considered here.

6. *Gruppen*

Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Gruppen für drie Orchester* (henceforth *Gruppen*) is an exemplary work of late-modernist music notable for its beauty and the grandness of its scale, as well as the intense level of difficulty associated with its performance. Often characterized as the most complex work of an era renowned for its complexity, it has a formal structure which engages with limits of the expressible and comprehensible in music. *Gruppen* accomplishes this through the deployment of micro-level sound events occurring near, or beyond the outer limits of human pitch and tempo perception, and a grand macro-level harmonic and spatial superstructure. In terms of the conceptual apparatus suggested by the Kantian mathematical sublime, we can understand the microstructure as establishing the units or quanta with which the listener can engage with the piece — in this case, time-events generally perceived as having either pitch or rhythmic quality. The macrostructure of the piece leverages these micro-events in the service of grand harmonic and spatial macro-events. Despite elements of the piece occurring outside the limits of human comprehension, the correspondences between these events, whether harmonic, temporal, or spatial, can allow a listener to perceive the shape of the overall structure of the piece and “understand” it on a *supersensible* level. The differentiation between the listening subject's displeasure or awe in the face of the seemingly infinite nature of the micro- and macro-events of the piece, and the pleasure of their supersensible ability to comprehend the piece, are motivating factors in my analysis of the piece and its meaning in light of the Kantian notion of the mathematical sublime.

In order to develop this analysis I will need to demonstrate how the formal characteristics of the piece (its tonal and temporal adumbrations) serve to evoke a sense of the infinite and the “formless” by means of the subject's inability to *apprehend* a perceptual unity, coupled with our

ability (*in posse* for now) to *comprehend* the work. In order to move this ability into the realm of *in esse*, I will outline a phenomenology of comprehension and apprehension whereby the work could appear sublime — in other words, posit a world, and its worlding factors, in which there could exist a subject-to-sublimity. To this end, I will take special care to ground *Gruppen* in its era and musical context before moving on to critical responses from those who have been deeply embedded in its particular sonic world.

Gruppen fur drie Orchester was composed between 1955 and 1957. It is a symphonic work for three orchestras, each with their own conductor. Originating in Stockhausen's studies in linguistics, interest in contemporary "cut-up" techniques²⁹, his notion of pitch and rhythm as different elements of frequency, and his own grounding in serialist composition, the piece represents one of his first true masterworks and the culmination of many concepts developed in the course of modernist musical theory and practice. According to Roger Smalley it is "probably the first work of the post-war generation of composers in which technique and imagination combine on the highest level to produce an undisputable masterpiece." Smalley also notes, however, that in a mere article it would be impossible to even "begin to analyze the work's incredibly complex micro-structure," but that he will attempt to "give an outline of the macro-structure of which this micro-structure is an articulation — the large-scale sections, characteristic textures, uses of instruments and deployment of orchestras which constitute the basic form-building elements and which aurally are unmistakably perceptible" ("Stockhausen's *Gruppen*." 794).

²⁹ Usually associated with the work of Brian Gysin and William S. Burroughs, the technique of dismantling newspaper clippings and rearranging them to create new associations and relations, as well as forcing one to think of language on the level of the letter, was being practiced at The University of Bonn while Stockhausen was a student, as his commentators often point out (see Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music*, 46).

Jonathan Harvey writes of *Gruppen* as

[A] paradoxical work; it is possibly the most involved of European total serial works, and yet there is an enormous amount of freedom in the details. There is a vast theory constructed almost “outside” the work which must have taken a truly Joycean fanaticism to write out, yet the parts in which Stockhausen is being most himself and at his best are those in which the theory has least influence, i.e. the interludes and the pitch structures of the final sections, structures not directed quite so much by band width clusters as elsewhere in the piece. [...] there is much in the more systematic aspects of the piece that is extremely effective, but there is also some of which the point, at present at least, is still difficult to hear. (*The Music of Stockhausen*, 76)

These comments, along with Smalley’s introductory sentence where he proclaims *Gruppen* “the greatest orchestral work since *The Rite of Spring*, and of similar epoch-making stature” (794), should give a good sense of not only the reactions but also the critical terms that surround the piece. Complexity, of course, is primary, hardly avoidable in a work requiring three separate orchestras and conductors. But unlike, say *Finnegans Wake*, which is, at least by scholars, relatively comprehensible on a micro-level, it is the macro-level on which *Gruppen* is relatively simple; the micro-level not only being routinely judged too complex to analyze, but often referred to as unnecessarily incomprehensible and wilfully opaque. These types of reactions come not only from listening to performances or recordings, but also from the experience of reading the score or the deeply involved theoretical writings associated with the piece. This awareness of the background work that went into the composition of *Gruppen* is an unavoidable fact of most critical evaluations of the piece, owing to the relevance of Stockhausen’s theoretical writings, as well as the innovative and unusual way in which Stockhausen deploys these formal theories. Like the *Wake* and *Ivan*, many analyses of *Gruppen* rely heavily on the composer’s own theoretical, autocritical, and reflective writings. Although it might be a stretch to label this “genetic criticism,” it certainly shares a reliance on materials epiphenomenal and antecedent to the work itself.

One of the reasons for this critical reliance on Stockhausen's writings is the difficulty of writing about *Gruppen* without first introducing a predominately novel lexicon of musical terms. Stockhausen's interest in the limits of musical expression and comprehensibility led him to a series of innovations in both structure and notation. Coupled with the immensely dense "background" theory of the piece, the critic or commentator is left in the position of choosing to either spend a great deal of time explaining the theoretical grounding of the piece before ever describing it, or describing it without defining the terms governing the description. I will try to chart a course between these two difficulties by providing a short, preliminary description of the work without fully explicating the technical terms or the specifics (and idiosyncrasies) of how Stockhausen deploys them.

***Gruppen* (Preliminary description)**

Most of the innovations of *Gruppen für drie Orchester* can be understood as enabling either a more detailed, granular level of control over sound on a micro-level or a more connected, coherent level of control on a macro-level — or both. Two of these innovations are contained in its title, the first being the use of three spatially distinct orchestras arranged in a horseshoe shape, each led by own conductor. The most obvious result of this arrangement is that it allows for three separate musical events, each with their own tempo, to occur simultaneously, a possibility which immediately suggests the second obvious result: the dramatically increased sense of spatial *movement* allowed by this horseshoe shape. In terms of possible depth of detail or the level of granularity of sound, a typical orchestra setting, despite allowing for some instrumental distinction, has well defined limits when it comes to hearable differences within the same instrumental section; the flautists sound unified by design. If two identical instruments played

notes a half-tone apart in the traditional orchestral arrangement, it would sound dissonant. By introducing *spatial* differentiation, Stockhausen was able to create a performance space where, for example, two flutes playing simultaneously a half-tone apart could potentially not sound dissonant — they would belong to their own sound cluster or “group” on another side of the horseshoe-shaped space. In terms of the superstructural (macro-level) aspects of the three-orchestra space, it allows for a remarkable sense of *movement* and unification of these separate groups. This sense of unification is achieved through the use of sound shapes: spatially organized harmonic convergences and melodic movements shifting from one side of the horseshoe to the other in wedges, lines, and other spatial groupings. An important aspect of these movements and convergences is that they rely on the intersection of several incredibly complex microsections, and as such, while giving a sense of totality and interconnection, strain the limits of musical apprehension in the listener. This sense of micro-movements leveraged against a macro-structure relies on the other titular term.

The “*Gruppen*” of *Gruppen für drei Orchester* refers to the 174 musical groups of a few seconds each that make up the piece. These often overlapping groups are one of the formal aspects of the piece that give it its unique structure, allowing for small bursts of sound as well as longer harmonic or melodic movements within a single orchestra, or moving across two or more. This atomistic division of the piece shows Stockhausen’s interest in limits in the sense of the micrological and fragmentary; however, he was also concerned with the universal and macrological. Although the tonal clusters and tempi vary between each, they are all governed by an overtone series determining not only pitch classes (as in traditional serialism) but tempi as well. In terms of pitch class, Stockhausen’s twelve-tone series seems fairly standard for a

serialist non-all-combinatorial overtone set: it is a paired hexachord, the consequent (notes 7–12) being a transposed inversion of the antecedent (notes 1–6) (see below).



What makes *Gruppen* unique as far as serial ordering is concerned is the fact that Stockhausen used this series not only to govern tone, but also to govern pitch. As Sara Overholt writes:

The avoidance of musical clichés alone was not enough, he needed to unify the process, to ensure that the whole would function the same as the individual elements themselves. In the end, the proportions of the overtone series served as the basis for his groupings, and provided him with the answer he was looking for — a sense of “organicism” based off a single vibration. (“Karlheinz Stockhausen’s Spatial Theories: Analyses of *Gruppen für drei Orchester* and *Oktophonie, Elektronische Musik vom Dienstag aus LICHT*”, 7–8)

(“Single vibration” refers here to the algorithmic relationship between frequency as pitch and frequency as rhythm.) Based in part on Stockhausen’s experiments with frequency generators and his interest in the moment when our perception of a sound decreasing in frequency changes from pitch to rhythm, and in part on the ratios between pitches on the chromatic scale, he conceived of an ordering system allowing him to serialize both pitch and tempi by considering them both as different points on the continuum of vibration. As way of example, if we take G as a base equaling the metronomic value of 60, then G sharp would equal 63.5, A would equal 67, A sharp 71, etc. This system allowed him to serialize pitch *and* tempo, the tempo of each group being ordered in relation to the same twelve-tone set that governs the pitch makeup. I will cover this relationship between pitch and tempi in *Gruppen* in greater detail below, but for now it should suffice to understand this ratio-based relationship as originating in his exploration of the limits of both the micro- and macro-possibilities of musical expression in terms of ordering and interrelating aspects of a piece. Imke Misch writes that

[I]t was in *Gruppen* that Stockhausen for the first time structured pitches and durations according to principles of consubstantiality, in that he interpreted pitch as a temporal phenomenon. With the framework of the subsequently undertaken, far reaching embodiment of these family relationships, Space and Time stand together in the structural constitution of *Gruppen* as musical dimensions in an unbroken, palpable continuum. (“On the Serial Shaping of Stockhausen’s *Gruppen Fur Drei Orchester*, 144)

In terms of the spatial aspects of this piece, the division of the composition into independent but tonally and temporally related groups allows for fine-grained distinctions as well as unifying moments and movements. The group compositional method, however, dictates that the piece have no “movements” in the traditional sense. Instead it has sections and groups within those sections, often overlapping and bleeding into one another. The closest equivalence to the idea of a musical “movement” in *Gruppen* would be the spatial movements and harmonic convergences that occur throughout the piece through interaction between groups across all three orchestras.

For most listeners encountering *Gruppen* for the first time, especially in concert,³⁰ it is these spatial leaps and convergences that are most remarkable in the piece, and the experience is often dominated by those moments of convergence. This is highlighted in the liner notes to the 2006 BMC release of *Eötvös Conducts Stockhausen*, where Richard Toop describes the piece as follows:

Clearly, one can’t give a blow-by-blow account of a work as complex as *Gruppen*. However, amidst all the dazzling diversity, one can certainly offer listeners a few pointers, especially to those passages where all three orchestras play in synchronization. There are actually many of these, but some in particular stand out as “set pieces.” The first, starting at about the three minute mark [...]

³⁰While nothing can compare to the experience of seeing *Gruppen* performed live, it is possible to experience the spatial aspects of the work on either the CD or vinyl versions of the various available recordings, particularly through the use of headphones with a large “soundstage.” All listening notes for this paper refer to the 1996 Deutsche Grammaphon recording and were listened to with a pair of Sennheiser HD598’s. However, given that the process of recording the piece necessarily involved mixing three channels of sound down to two, there must inevitably be moments when any recorded version becomes “muddy” or unrepresentatively dense where all three orchestras play. This comes from the use of binaural, stereo sound to locate the middle orchestra while each monaural channel is simultaneously producing the left and right orchestra’s sounds. A detailed knowledge of the piece can allow one to distinguish these moments and determine those sounds belonging to the middle orchestra but, as always, there is no substitution for a live performance.

involves a solo violin [...] in the course of a couple of minutes the orchestral forces build up, momentarily swamp the violin, and then die away again. The second, starting at around 9'30", and likewise lasting a couple of minutes, features those marginalia of the traditional orchestra that had become central to the avant-garde orchestra: above all, percussion and the "harmony instruments" (piano, harp, guitar etc.). The third, and perhaps most spectacular (from c. 14'30" onwards), initially has a sinister, almost marital quality, partly due to its emphasis on brass instruments. The latter gradually increase in density and intensity to what is perhaps the most celebrated (though also simplest) moment in *Gruppen*, where a single held chord is passed from one orchestra to another. Then comes an explosive piano solo, followed by an extraordinarily passage, becoming ever more complex, which finishes by challenging the limits of what human ears can actually take in. Following this acoustic apocalypse (at about 18'45"), the final minutes of the work have (perhaps inevitably) a sort of valedictory quality, despite a final outburst just before the end.

I have quoted Toop at length not only to give a sense of the shape of the piece as it unfolds over its (in that recording) twenty-four minutes, but also to illustrate which aspects of the piece appear most salient for listeners. Toop elides the many complex and detailed moments between these dramatic set pieces not, one assumes, because he does not consider them important, but because the piece, by design, draws attention to the moments of convergence between the orchestras. A listener learns to anticipate these moments of convergence and orient their sense of attention towards their emergence. Even though much of the sound between these moments can seem much more superficially disconnected, it too retains strong structural links to simultaneous sounds as well as the structure of the work as a whole. The moments of actual convergence being the "payoff," as it were, for the dense interrelatedness of the piece that one can sense or even comprehend, but never fully grasp.

Hopefully this description has sufficed to give a sense of *Gruppen*, and the difficulty of approaching it critically. Although most recordings of the work only total between 21 and 24 minutes in length, there have been very few "total" analyses of the work. Even the superlative

analysis provided by Sara Overholt³¹ in her dissertation on Stockhausen's "Spatial Theories" in *Gruppen* and *Oktophonie* looks only at specific elements of the work. While any sort of in-depth musical analysis is far outside the reach of this paper, in order to give a sense of the immense complexity of this short piece, and how it fits into my thesis, it will be necessary to sharply divide my different approaches to the work. In order to properly locate *Gruppen* within its historical context I will begin with a brief section on the music-historical context of its creation — modernist composition — showing how the piece can be defined against other contemporary categories such as the emergent experimental scene (post-modernism) and the foundational modernism-proper of total or integral serialism. Following this, I will explore some of Stockhausen's ideas leading up to and embodied by *Gruppen*, in particular those concerning the perception and expression of musical time. Taking the vocabulary and concepts covered there, I will move forward to an examination and closer description of the work itself, showing, through examples garnered from recent critical work on the piece, how particular aspects of the work exemplify Stockhausen's concepts.

***Gruppen* and Late Modernism**

The work of Karlheinz Stockhausen in the 1950s and 1960s, along with the work of contemporaries such as Luigi Nono and Iannis Xenakis, represents a high-water mark in European avant-garde composition that we can broadly define as musical late-modernism. While no definition can, of course, have an absolutely rigid boundary, it will be helpful to differentiate this period and the music it produced from modernism proper and the post-modern to follow. The

³¹ Overholt and Mische are both recent commentators whose work examines *Gruppen* with unprecedented depth and insight, and without whom this section would not have been possible.

definition I would like to use here would place late-modernist works at the juncture between total or integral serialism (modernism proper) and experimentalism (post-modernism). While there are obviously a great many works which fall into more than one of these categories, definitions of each of these movements or categories will help us to highlight the middle ground, which the majority of Stockhausen's work (including *Gruppen*) occupies.

There are two approaches one can take to the definition of serialism: a minimal, purely musical definition; and a maximal, formal definition. Both will be useful for our purposes, but I would like to start with the broadest definition possible, one provided by Markus Bandur in his *Aesthetics of Total Serialism*, where he introduced the concept as follows:

Serial thinking is the concept of creating artificial forms based on a special relationship between individuality (uniqueness) and similarity, focusing on avoiding repetition, aiming for completeness, tending toward permanent innovation in both theory and practice, and revolving around the idea of structural mediation between different quantities, qualities, types and classes of elements; more than enough for any artist to work with in a never ending spiraling movement up to infinite progress. (7)

This laundry-list of theoretical determinations includes many concepts I have touched upon so far, and working through the specifics of this list should provide a ground from which to advance to a workable definition of serialism. The first thing to notice about this definition is that it is clearly outlining a *formalized* practice, an abstract theoretical toolset whose ideas should be viable across different artistic practices. Although serialism *qua* twelve-tone composition is clearly limited to musical composition, many composers, including Stockhausen found methodological similarities to other artistic practices, especially painting (See Cott, 213).

Whether attributable to *zeitgeist* or *weltanschauung*, these parallels are symptomatic of the larger modernist focus on formalization in general, and in the rest of his description we can read themes related to the avant-garde (the quest for perpetual newness), and an increased unity

between theory and practice. More specifically, the focus on finding a formal relationship between repetition, individuality, and sameness, as well as awareness of the interrelationships between quantitative and qualitative aspects of the total work, feed well into the themes of the infinite and infinitesimal explored in the previous chapters, as well as reminding us of the core concepts of the minimal and maximal versions of limit exploration. While these are obviously very loose theoretical ideas, their connection to my broader thesis will hopefully remain apparent as we look closer at the specifics of musical serialism and the important distinction between late modernist avant-gardism (Stockhausen and Xenakis, among others), post-modern experimentalism (John Cage, Michael Nyman, and others), and modernist serialism proper (Arnold Schoenberg, Pierre Boulez, and others).

Twelve-Tone Serialism and Modernism

The origins of the term “serialism,” much less the organizational technique or system itself, are somewhat murky, and tracing its specific development is outside the focus of this paper, but we can generally speak of it as originating around 1920. As defined and practiced by its originator and most famous proponent, Arnold Schoenberg, dodecaphonic serialism is a compositional method based on a set of twelve pitch classes which are ordered in relation to each other. This pitch-class collection (which, for the purposes of this paper, we will refer to as a set) then reoccurs throughout the piece, arranged in the usual manner of composition through inversion, retrogression, or transposition, but cannot be rearranged internally. An important factor of Schoenberg’s particular version of dodecaphonic serialism (other tonal groups, of course, being possible outside the domain of twelve-tone serialism) is the occurrence of each pitch class exactly once within each collection of interval before recurring. Schoenberg occasionally uses

two orders (almost always with only a slight variance) of pitch-class sets within a single piece, but in these cases they would be considered variations of the set, and different entities as such. This type of serialism, predicated upon the rule of non-repetition and non-exclusion within each successive collection or set and non-variation within each set, has been variably called “total serialism,” “integral serialism,” or, in an article written on the “failure” of the movement, “aggregate serialism.” This article, “Serialism and its Contradictions” by Allan F. Moore, is a short summary of the failures of serialism considered in the context of its exemplary modernism and serves as an excellent collection of objections to serialism. The extent to which serialism can be considered a “failure” is usually established, as it is by Moore, in contrast to a notorious statement of Schoenberg’s where he characterized his discovery of serialism as ensuring “the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years” (Qtd. in Moore, 77). While serialism most certainly failed in this context, as well by most other markers of popularity, Moore argues that it fails as a communicative (i.e. expressive) tool for other reasons specifically tied to its status as an exemplary modernist concept. By following him through his argument we can get a sense of serialism’s meaning as well as its relationship to modernist ideas.

After quoting the above Schoenberg statement, Moore continues to a definition of modernism relying on Calinescu’s definition of “a culture of rupture,” exemplified by Degas’s “sordid realism” and the innovations of Joyce and Woolf, as well as Bauhaus and, for music, the “fragmentation of melodic gesture” found in, for example, Webern’s *Symphony* (78). After pointing out that this concept of rupture emerges from within an already established aesthetic structure, he moves on to modernity’s predication upon “the construction of autonomy of the individual, from Descartes to Kant through to Adorno” (78). This concept being the basis for the aesthetic autonomy best exemplified through the act of “creating” serialism, which he sees as “an

apogee of modernist expression, not only in terms of the method itself, but with reference to the fact that the autonomy of the serial work is strengthened by the autonomy of each work's individual series" (78). Moore's point is that the championing of autonomous choice, and the concept of the artist-as-creator, asserts itself at several structural levels including the creation of the method itself, and its opposition to the sense of the "natural" in music, which "obtains in tonality [...] in terms of such features as scalar contours and harmonically engendered pulse" (78). Dodecaphonic serialism, then, is modernist in both its provenance (conceived of and primarily championed by one person, despite its murky origins and many antecedents), as well as its internal formalism, each work's series of notes being particular to that piece and dictating the structure of the whole in an overtly artificial manner. Moore concludes his introduction to the modernism of serialism by quoting the Habermas piece with which I began my own introduction, and draws the conclusion that serialism is a special kind of failure *qua* "modernity as an incomplete project": i.e. he believes it failed because of its internal contradictions, not necessarily because of the widely noted failure of the public to embrace the products of its methods. By "internal contradictions" Moore is referring to a lack of agreement as to the particular methodological parameters of serialism (even specifically dodecaphonic serialism), even among its principal advocates. Whether or not Babbitt or Gerhard (whom he especially focuses on) truly adhere to any sort of methodological determination of Schoenberg's, or anyone else's, is far outside the interests of this paper, and does not, I think, contribute much to the history of formal analysis of serialism, but Moore's paper has a sub-thesis that is far more interesting, and of greater relevance here. In the process of outlining the various contradictions of serialism *qua* modernism, Moore raises the crucial question of whether the methods of serialism are in any sense *perceptible* to the listener, and whether this should have any bearing on the value

of the method and its products. This question is important not only because it links serialism and its descendants to a central modernist question of “for whom,” but also because it brings up crucial issues related to the concept of listenability and the limits of perception.

Moore first raises this issue in the context of a question posed by Roberto Gerhard: “What possible ‘significance’ could be extracted from consciously registering the file-past of the terms of a given series in the correct order?” (Gerhard Qtd. in Moore, 82). After this question, in which we should hear echoes of the phenomenological vocabulary of Husserl’s analysis of the consciousness of internal time, Moore quotes Gerhard at length on the general significance of serial composition:

There are people who do pretend that they are in fact able to detect and to follow the serial thread *in audition*. I do not feel that I am unduly assertive in saying that they must not be believed. If they could be believed, theirs would be an odd case of auditory perversion indeed. But then, you may ask, if “serial manipulation” is not audible, can serialism be of any “significance” whatsoever? The answer is evidently: not to you as a listener or as a performer, since “knowledge of serial operations is not required for full appreciation of the music” [quoted from Standlen 1956:16, reporting comments of Webern]. To me, as a composer, the question of serial significance is meaningless. (83)

I have followed Moore in quoting this entire passage because I believe it represents one of the most common claims made about, or against, serialism and its related formalisms. The primary claims here are, first, that serialism’s methods are not “hearable;” and second, that this is irrelevant for the composer. Gerhard is, however, a proponent and practitioner of twelve-tone composition, so we must conclude that his message is simply that the method is only of use for the composer and should, indeed must, remain unhearable at a surface level. This might seem a superficial or purely theoretical consideration, but in fact dramatically affects the way in which serially ordered music is composed, and even the broader genre to which its productions may be said to belong. Continuing to follow Gerhard’s comments as quoted by Moore we arrive at his

central claim: “Constraint is the whole purpose, the very *raison d’être* of the method. From which it is easy to see how little of the meaning of Schoenberg’s idea has been understood by practitioners of a so-called ‘free twelve-tone technique’” (84). Coupled with his remarks from four years earlier to the extent that the core of a serialist work lies in the permutations of the “abstract archetype” of paired hexachords, of which the selected twelve-tone series is only one manifestation, we can provide a general outline of his conception of serialism (84).

First, the compositional distinction between harmonically and melodically conceived ordering is important for the divide between avant-garde and experimental music, Gerhard’s “constraint based” conception of serialism more closely resembling Dogme ’95 or other formal constraint based *experimental* rule systems, rather than the governed set of inter-relations of the more avant-garde-minded serialism. The important distinction here is between a formal rule that allows for shaping or control (as Stockhausen uses serial ordering) and a constraint meant to generate interesting contingent results.

Gerhard’s belief that serialism is essentially a method of compositional constraint can be partly explained through his conception of serialism based on ordered hexachords and revolving around a *harmonic* formalism. The conception of paired hexachords rather than the more *melodically* focused view espoused by composers like Babbitt, whose conception focuses on ordered series conceived of as total invariant sets, where the relationship between the antecedent (first six notes) and consequent (last six) tend towards asymmetry or free permutation, rather than the relationship of transposition or reversal favored by Gerhard and other more harmonically oriented composers (86). This is an important distinction for several reasons. One would be the issue of the “hearability” of twelve tone composition, as it is much easier to detect the originary set in a composition defined by a total, melodically conceived piece than a piece

where the original twelve tones are conceived as combined hexachords governing the harmonic structure of the piece. This is a relatively basic phenomenon in music, as melodic lines can be heard as series, retained, and then “echoed” in memory upon their repetition; as opposed to recombinant hexachords, whose appearance in harmonic structure is perceived as part of the background of a complex development. This is not to say that it is *impossible* to perceive the harmonic series buttressing a piece’s architecture, only that a listener is generally oriented towards reception of melodic series rather than recombinant chords, the former being far more aurally salient. Part of this distinction is that harmony, of course, is inherently distinct from melody in terms of its reception in time: harmony is received simultaneously and melody consecutively. If we think of the experience of listening to a piece of music in terms of the “hearability” of the formal terms underlying its composition, an imaginative protention or anticipation of either a previously heard series of notes or one that a particular listener has been culturally conditioned (or worlded) to anticipate is more “hearable” than the appearance of a *harmonic* moment, especially in the case of *Gruppen* where that harmonic moment, more often than not, obtains within a complex field of spatially individuated groups of sound.

The concept of “protention” or anticipation, that of the forward looking imagination, and the familiar notion of a world or horizon are important phenomenological terms for my thesis as to *Gruppen*’s ability to evoke the sublime. Protention can be understood as the future-looking attention preceding intuition that, importantly, changes how we receive datum in consciousness.

Lanei Rodemeyer’s *Intersubjective Temporality: It’s About Time*, an excellent analysis of Husserlian conceptions of temporality, discusses protention as follows:

[P]rotention is considered a “part” of the activity of the living present, understood as a living constituting “extension” of “momentary” intuition. The term protention thus seems to be brought in to emphasize the relation between intentionality and temporalizing consciousness, since intentionality is always looking forward,

towards what is coming, in our experiences of the world. Protention is that aspect of constituting consciousness that is extending “ahead” of what is immediately being actualized. (136)

Intentionality must always be intentionality *of something*, and protention is an anticipatory element of consciousness directed toward a specific intended future, the particularities of this future-oriented intentionality dictated by the horizontal, or worldly position from whence and where it is intended. In other words, our directed anticipation effects the way in which we receive datum in consciousness, and our world effects what we anticipate. In the context of music we can speak of worlding affecting anticipation or protention in terms of the effects of short term retention on protention: the memory of a melodic sequence affects a subject’s anticipation of the notes they hear, for instance; expecting or anticipating a reprise or recapitulation of a melodic sequence; or in broader terms, a subject’s knowledge of classical music in general, or a specific composer’s oeuvre in particular, shading the type of anticipation with which they would receive a piece of said composers music. This is, of course, a simplification of a descriptive phenomenological account of protentional listening, a fuller version of which would have to include the *spatial* and non-linearity of music, integrating both simultaneity and succession; but in the context of the *hearability* of serially ordered tone-sets, a linear notion of protention should suffice.

To rephrase Gerhard’s position, he generally believes it impossible (in fact, “perverse”) to be able to *protend* towards the specific ordered series of a twelve-tone set. However, this belief is more a reflection of his tendency to think of serialism in terms of harmonically-oriented paired hexachords than it does any real phenomenological analysis of a listener’s ability to hear an ordered set. As stated above, Stockhausen *does* use paired hexachords as the governing set of *Gruppen*, but as these hexachords (the consequent a transposed inversion of the antecedent) are

first of all an *overtone* series, and second, both *temporally* and *tonally* governing, not to mention their deployment within the highly complex group-based composition of the piece, a subject's ability to pretend towards the type of musical structures they produce must be judged slightly differently. Stockhausen's use of groups, along with his use of frequency as the formal determinant behind its manifestations as either pitch or rhythm, places the "meaning" of the piece more firmly in the interrelations between discrete sounds and tempi than most contemporary works; however, the concept of protention is still important for our eventual description of the listening experience. Moore also includes opinions from critics more amenable to the possibility of hearing the formal structures of serialism, including Joseph Straus, who writes:

When we listen to twelve-tone music, we don't need to be able to identify the forms of the series. Instead, we need to hear the musical consequences of the series, the musical results of its ongoing transformations...As we hear our way through a piece, our ear is often lead via a chain of invariants. (Qtd. in Moore, 82)

In *Gruppen* the "chain of invariants" is the overtone series, which is indeed "hearable," but our ear can also be led by the series of interrelations emergent in space, which is just as viable a way of perceiving *some* of the formal structure governing the piece's construction.

A softer form of Gerhard's criticism of the hearability of serialist methods is also quoted by Moore, this time from Paul Griffiths, and directed specifically towards Iannis Xenakis, a composer whose formally complex methodologies could possibly rival Stockhausen's. Griffiths writes that "Xenakis's methods must give one cause for extreme doubt that the sophistication of this mathematics is *expressed in his music*" (82). In Xenakis's case, much of the mathematics behind his compositional methods is used to generate probability fields or chance distributions, so we can easily respond to Griffiths

by saying that the point is not to *express* mathematics, but to express *contingency*, the mathematics being necessary to remove the will of the composer and introduce this factor.³² This is a very different goal from Stockhausen's, and belongs more fully to experimentalism, but it is worth first investigating the question of whether or not a piece's sound must justify the complex background methodologies used to produce it. As far as *Gruppen* goes, we can say definitely that the huge amount of theoretical background, the "vast theory constructed almost 'outside' the work which must have taken a truly Joycean fanaticism to write out," is in fact there to ensure that the details of the work are *not* entirely hearable, but rather exist at and beyond the threshold of hearability, allowing the work to be, even to the most dedicated and perspicacious listener, "formless" in the sense of inapprehensible in its totality and capable, therefore, of evoking the sublime. (Harvey, 76)

Experimentalism and Post-Modernism

In order to locate Stockhausen's work before examining it, it is necessary to establish not only his forebears but also a distinct split between him and his contemporaries. Stockhausen's music falls strictly outside the provenance of the "experimental" for reasons that are important for establishing the meaning of *Gruppen* as well as for understanding the period in which it was written.

In his *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, Michael Nyman provides what is likely the most thorough determination of these two categories of contemporary music, and although his interests lie mostly in the titular field, his meditations prove illuminating for both. He begins

³² See, for example, the use of the Poisson distribution in Xenakis's *Achorripsis* (1956-1957).

his definition of experimental music by stating that

Experimental composers are by and large not concerned with prescribing a defined *time-object* whose materials, structuring and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance, but are more excited by the prospect of outlining a *situation* in which sounds may occur, a *process* of generating action [...]. (3)

The important terms here are “time-object” and “situation,” both of which Nyman is opposing to more open experimental work and its emphasis on the work as a *becoming* and the musical moment as generated by a *process* rather than a form. If we take the iconic experimental work “4’33” — a piece for any instrument in which the musician stands silently for the allotted time — as an example, we can see that despite the fact that time is the only controlled element of the performance, Cage is clearly less interested in defining the structures of the time passing and more interested in letting contingencies emerge within it: the audience’s sounds of discomfort or nervousness, the sounds of the world outside the performance space, the spectacle of the musician in silence, etc. All the core interests of experimentalism involve some degree of contingency and emergence within a compositional space designed to accept them, hence the focus on stochastic procedures either in the compositional technique (as in many of Cage’s pieces) or in the parameters of the performance itself (as in many of Christian Wolff’s). In contrast, Stockhausen and other avant-garde composers are in many ways continuing the classical tradition which Nyman writes is “essentially a system of *priorities* which sets up ordered relationships between its components, and where one thing is defined in terms of its opposite [...]: high/low, rise/fall, fast/slow, climax stasis [etc.]” (24). Experimental music might contain these contrasts, but generally they occur spontaneously, rather than as a planned effect for a particular moment. While Cage and other experimental composers attempt to produce sound allowing the listener’s “mobile awareness” to experience the sound of a piece freely, Stockhausen’s “processed package gives the listener fewer chances of this kind since the major

part of the organizing has been done for him” (25). To illustrate this, Nyman quotes Stockhausen contra Cage saying:

So many composers think that you can take any sound and use it. That’s true insofar as you really can take it and integrate it and ultimately create some kind of harmony and balance. Otherwise it atomizes... You can include many different forces in a piece, but when they start destroying each other and there’s no harmony established between the different forces, then you’ve failed. You must be capable of really integrating the elements and not just expose them and see what happens. (Stockhausen Qtd. in Nyman, 25)

Nyman follows this quote with an observation about the “key European avant-garde words, ‘integrate,’ ‘harmony,’ ‘balance’” (25), opposing them to Cage’s interest in letting relationships develop “naturally.” This use of “naturally” should clarify some of the remarks above regarding the essential *artificiality* and autonomy of modernism, in that the post-modern (Habermas would, of course, say “anti-modern”) response involves an attempted repudiation of these concepts. Organic emergence of sound is being established as the experimental antithesis to the type of deeply controlled, rigorously formalized sound structures emergent in Serialism in particular, and the European avant-garde in general. And while Nyman’s tone throughout this book is fairly partisan, even his negative remarks about Stockhausen (“once a European art composer, always a European art composer” (25)) are illuminating in terms of understanding what Stockhausen is *not* trying to accomplish with his compositions — although, as we shall see, the shaping of Gruppen involved many concepts and structural tools which might seem to belong to the realm of the experimental but are, in fact, being deployed for very different purposes. Nyman again explains some of the core differences in a passage that touches upon some of the most important concepts for this chapter:

[Stockhausen’s composing] is as it is in classical systems where the listener is manipulated by a music that progresses as a series of signposts: listen to this here, at this point, in this context, in apposition to this or that; in such a way that your method of listening is conditioned by what went before, and will condition, in roughly the way the composer intends, what comes next. And what in

experimental music (say a piece by Feldman) is almost a fact of living, that you should listen from moment to moment, was made by Stockhausen into a fact of structure (Moment *Form*) where the moments are not heard as-they-happen, but as-they-are-structured (to happen). (25)

There are two very important, closely related points here, the first being the extent to which we are conditioned to listen in a certain manner, not only by our general cultural/musical expectations but also by the notes we have just heard; the second being the idea that this flow of expectations and fulfillments can be accepted in different ways depending on the structure and compositional techniques governing the music itself. Both of these points echo my considerations above regarding the possibility of hearing the formal structure of serialism in a piece and the relative merits of this type of approach to listening, as well as more explicitly engaging with the concept of worlding in relation to music. Nyman appears to be suggesting that the precepts governing the composer's method are not only hearable by listeners, but can radically alter the way in which the temporal flow of music prepares one's consciousness for what follows. Experimental music, according to Nyman (and many of the composers about whom he writes) accords its listeners the ability to freely direct their consciousness to the flow of incoming notes with a great deal less of a) direction on the part of the composer; and b) directed, pre-established anticipation regarding a particular note or series of notes to be anticipated in the flow of time. One way of understanding this claim would be to take a very predictable series of sounds, such as the ticking of a pocket watch, and consider how one perceives these sounds as they flow towards us in consciousness. In his *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, Husserl uses this example as a way of establishing the concept of *augmentation and its limits*, a useful concept for the difference Nyman is attempting to establish. Husserl describes the ticking of the pocket watch in terms of the first tick (T_1) appearing as *present itself*, and then, as the second tick (T_2) appears, T_1 no longer *appears* at all, as long as we consider

“appears” as signifying “appears as now present,” but may, in fact, be perceived as “lying back in time.” When T_3 appears, the process repeats itself, with both T_1 and the series (T_1, T_2) as a series lying back in time. Each successive tick appears as an *augmentation* of this continual series running off in time (198–199). Now, it is important to emphasize that this is the phenomenological description of an absolutely predictable and repeating sound, as opposed to a melody of even the simplest order, but certain concepts we can develop herein will be valuable nonetheless. For one, it is important to add to our phenomenological vocabulary this concept of *augmentation* whereby a series of now-moments flowing through consciousness is experienced in terms of an augmentation and not a shift or rupture of a series. Each successive tick is a T_n , not a new term. Another, even more important concept is developed by Husserl in his next paragraph, as he elaborates that

this process *does not continue ad infinitum*. When new Ts are perceived, the other Ts are still *intuited* simultaneously, just not any number of them. Even if the clock appears to be ticking constantly, even if I say that I continuously perceive it as ticking, the unity of the intuition in which the T's that are actually past jointly appear does not extend very far. While new Ts come onto the scene, past Ts “disappear” from *intuition* although I “*know*” that others have preceded those that are there: “for a fairly long period of time.” (199–200)

What is important here for our purposes is the flattening effect repetition can have on not only the markers of time in consciousness, but also our ability to intuit specific moments in the past. While we can comprehend the fact that n amount of Ts have been heard, we cannot apprehend specific T_n s beyond those lying within immediate reach of recollection. There are important implications here for the methodologies and structures of both experimental and avant-garde music, especially in terms of the desired effects upon a listener of ordered, non-repetitive but complex structures, versus repetitive structures or even non-repetitive but simple music generated by stochastic operations. Modernism proper, and the Stockhausen of *Gruppen* and

late-modernism, is still very much concerned with, in some ways, controlling the response of the listener to a piece — not as ready to relinquish that control as experimental or post-modern compositional methodologies.

If we couple the descriptions of the falling off of repetitive intuition of successive moments in time (both their augmentative character and the difficulty of retaining this augmentative sequence *ad infinitum*) with the above descriptions of *protending* towards a melodic line and the different types of anticipation associated with different protentions, we can begin to understand how some sense of the transient or even ephemeral could obtain in experimental music in a manner far removed from avant-garde or classical music. Nyman writes that

One of the automatic consequences, or so it appears, of the musical process employed by experimental composers, is the effect of flattening out, de-focusing the musical perspective. This flatness may be brought about in a situation ranging from uniformity and minimum change – for example, the music of Steve Reich or John White, which consists of a constant or near-constant band of sound from which inessentials have been removed, to one of maximum change and multiplicity, for instance in Cage or the Scratch Orchestra where no attempt is made to harmonize or make coherent any number of hermetic and self-contained “compartments.” (26)

The example of the repetition and uniformity in Reich and White leads to the type of phenomenological flattening and loosening in time described by Husserl in relation to a series of repeated ticks. The emergent N_n^{th} sound orders itself into a series wherein one cannot determine the length or individual structures of the particular notes at the beginning of the series, dislocating the listener from any standard sensation of memory or anticipation associated with listening to classical music. The second example, the cacophony or complete unpredictability of a Cage or Scratch Orchestra piece, has the same end-result; however, this is a result of the listener being unable to determine *any* series whatsoever, so that each successive sound must

appear as its own individual term, disconnected from any continuous line of sound and only able to be recalled as a discrete appearance. Nyman writes that “[f]orm thus becomes an assemblage, growth an accumulation of things that have piled-up in the time-space of the piece” (26). He opposes the experimental notion of succession (non- or omni-directional) against the classical notion of progression (directional), a distinction important for Stockhausen’s project which, in all of these senses, is very much aligned with the modernist or avant-garde — or, in this comparison, with the classical world of composition rather than the experimental. In order to engage with the types of temporal concepts *Gruppen* is concerned with, it needs be aligned with at least some sense of temporal *progression*, apprehensible through both protention and memory, and comprehensible as discrete temporal figures. In experimental music, as painter Brian Doherty wrote of Feldman’s music, and as quoted by Nyman: “Sounds do not progress, but merely heap up and accumulate in the same place (like Jasper Johns’s numbers). This blurs and obliterates the past, and obliterating it, removes the possibility of a future” (26).

Against this obliteration stands the modernist will to shape time: Woolf’s and Joyce’s experiments with representing fragmented, compressed, or stretched temporal rhythms; the majority of early cinema’s obsession with representing various time perceptions; even the frozen perspectival moments of cubism could be categorized as attempts to capture or represent through art various modes of time-consciousness. To this we can oppose the intrinsically *contingent* nature of the post-modernist relationship with time. Artists from John Cage and Merce Cunningham to Michael Snow and Marina Abramovich allow time control to shape their works. Stockhausen is still very much on the modernist side of this divide, aiming to control and manage not only his audience’s, but his players’ and conductors’ time consciousness with relation to the work.

***Gruppen* and The Modernist Sublime**

Near the end of Nyman's book, in which Morton Feldman is one of the primary heroes, and Stockhausen, if not a villain, is certainly a *bête noir*, he relates the story of

Stockhausen's notoriously arrogant aside to Morton Feldman-"[I] once told Feldman that one of his pieces could be a moment in my music, but never the other way around" '-[which is] indicative of an attitude that cannot comprehend true simplicity in music. A simple "moment" can be recognized as such only when posited against another, more complex moment. In Stockhausen's music simplified moments are either set against other moments of greater complexity, or they fulfill a complex role in the total structure of the work; whereas Feldman's simple work is a complete field in which moments of greater and/or lesser simplicity, if they occur at all, have no intended relational significance in the traditional sense. (81)

While I have no wish to defend Stockhausen from this essentially fair assessment, I would like to reframe it in the context my major thesis. Stockhausen's work of this period, particularly *Gruppen*, is completely focused on notions of complexity and limits, and while one may, of course, posit limits in an alternate direction (4'33", Beckett contra Joyce, etc.), his habit, described above by Nyman, of using even "simple" moments in complex ways within total structures is part of a drive towards the limits of comprehensible musical expression that finds its peak in *Gruppen* — which can, in some ways, be considered an expression of that particularly modernist evocation of the sublime. It is, in fact, those particular traits which Nyman sees as ignorant in Stockhausen that serve as the possibility of this evocation of the sublime through an elevation of complexity to the point where the listener is able to hear suggestions of the minutiae of micro-level temporal and spatial differentiation supporting the superstructure of harmonic convergence and divergence that sweeps across all three orchestras. This point of perception does not present to the listener a total field of comprehensible (though complex) sound, but instead the

sense of perceiving a *threshold*, beyond which lies the even denser microstructure, whose effects can be heard, but the total perception of which lies outside of the realm of possibility. *Gruppen* can be considered evocative of the sublime through this engagement with the infinite. The work is grounded upon a finite, but enormously complex group of discrete sound-units, each serially determined in both the pitch and rhythmic senses of “frequency,” and each buttressing the superstructure which recapitulates the serial ordering of these groups’ tempo and tonal groups, thus leveraging the minimal against the maximal in a way which is technically coherent but incomprehensibly (in the strictest sense of the word) deep. The minimal tonal and temporal variations are as clear as is possible, the innovation of the three spatially distinct orchestras aiding this fact through the deployment of groups of minutely inter-distinguishable sounds converging and diverging across the horseshoe-shaped spatial field. This “as is possible” still allows for a great deal of musical “content” to remain beneath the audible range, either because of the impossibility of taking in so much simultaneously (amendable with repeated listening) or because of the strict limits of human sensory ability — a conscious theme of the work itself, whose tonal and temporal ranges often hover at these thresholds.

As we glimpse, in the course of the next section, some of the hows and whys of Stockhausen’s compositional methods, it will become clear that the possibility of the work being found “sublime” — i.e., conveying a sense of the comprehensible, but inapprehensible infinite through its immanent differential between the minutiae and maxima of form — has much to do with the value of serialism in its more general appearance. The question, hinted at in this section, and asked directly in the section on Modernism proper, can be understood as one of the perceptibility of method. However, it can also be understood as relating to the value of a particularly modernistic type of formalism, one concerned with the limits of fragmentation and

universality, and capable of evoking the sense of satisfaction derived from the triumph of the supersensible over the sensible, which we can amend in this context to include the formally abstract over the materially concrete. In terms of the discussion around facticity and Casey's notion of "edge" in the Joyce chapter, we can imagine an experience of *Gruppen* where a listener's liminal awareness of the underlying formal structure, although not always immediate in its presentation, allows for an opening into the work's evocation of the infinite: the vacillation between perception and imperception bequeathing the "formlessness" necessary for the moment of instantiation where the work evokes the sublime.

Stockhausen and the Theory behind *Gruppen*

To explain the structure of *Gruppen* and the concepts that lay behind its construction, it will be necessary to first outline some of the genetic factors of Stockhausen's compositional method, then move to the theory surrounding the work itself. Like the *Wake* and *Ivan*, *Gruppen* has a great deal of ephemera, notes, and theoretical background associated with it, far more than could be expanded upon in this paper, but some of which is necessary for a full appreciation of the work. Unlike those two works, however, much of Stockhausen's theoretical or formal background work leading up to and defining *Gruppen* is novel to a point where it is often as difficult to interpret for musicians as for lay readers. In an effort to explicate this theory, as well as show how it supports my thesis, this section will be structured around providing a sort of lexicon of Stockhausen's ideas of compositional and general music theory, relying heavily on Jonathon Cott's interviews with the composer. I will begin with some of the concepts Stockhausen engaged with in the musical works leading up to *Gruppen*, and move on to the concepts explored in the major theoretical companion piece to *Gruppen*: his "...how time

passes.....”, translated by Cornelius Cardew and appearing in the Stockhausen- and Herbert Eimert–edited *die Reihe* journal in 1959 (the German edition having appeared two years earlier). My commentary and explication throughout this section will be aimed at providing an explanation of this article, as well as outlining some of the specifically temporal aspects of *Gruppen* to which the article is especially applicable.

General Theory

Karlheinz Stockhausen’s work is built upon a deep theoretical and unusually philosophical basis. Although much of the philosophical grounding of his work remains implicit, it would not be a stretch to say that most of it falls under the rubric of phenomenology. Indicators of this would include his preoccupation with audience as well as performer-based perception, an interest in the limits of comprehensibility of sound-groups, as well as more specific ideas such as a phenomenological critique of the doctrine of naturalism in science.³³ Along with this interest in phenomenology, one of Stockhausen’s main theoretical concerns is the limits and compositional possibilities of individuated and minute units of sound. This concern manifests itself in many of his pieces, including *Gesang der Jünglinge*, the *Klavierstücke* series, *Zeitsmasze*, and of course *Gruppen*, and his interest in *controlling* these units of sound and their interrelations — rather than allowing a set of contingent relations to merely *emerge*, as an experimental artist would — is a constant throughout.

It is widely acknowledged that one of the catalysts for Stockhausen’s group-based compositional methods in general, and for *Gruppen* in particular, was his study of cut-up or

³³ For the latter, see his comments regarding science only “describing the abilities of our measuring instruments” (in Cott, 73).

aleatoric linguistic methods at the University of Bonn. However, unlike Cage or a literary cut-up proponent like William S. Burroughs, Stockhausen's interpretation of the procedure avoids contingent and emergent concepts or figures as much as possible, focusing instead on the potential for smaller units and more complex methods of combination (Overholt, p. 5).

Stockhausen explains his time at Bonn as follows:

When I was studying music, the highest ideal of the good interpreter was to be faithful to the score. Then one by one, scores were written in which statistical processes became very important. I started doing this in 1954, highly influenced by my teacher Meyer-Eppler who was teaching communication science at the University of Bonn where aleatoric processes in statistics, primarily in mathematics but also in sociology and physics, played a strong role. In the seminars at that time, we were making artificial texts by cutting up newspapers into one-, two-, three-syllable units, sometimes going to the extreme and cutting up individual letters. We'd shuffle them like cards, make new artificial texts, and then study the degree of redundancy. Naturally, the more you cut down a given text, the less redundant would be the result of the new chance-produced text. (67-68)

Like Cage, Xenakis and others, Stockhausen was trained fairly early on in aleatoric procedures like these, but his attitude is remarkably different. From this comment, we can see that his primary interest in the aleatoric process is in terms of its ability to break down a unified expression of meaning into constituent parts, much like Joyce's atomistic linguistic innovations in the *Wake*. The "point" of aleatoric processes is for Stockhausen, then, simply a guarantee of true randomness in the "breaking down" phase of artistic creation, allowing for more microscopic units with which to build a cohesive whole. Although Stockhausen is here referring to Meyer-Eppler solely in the context of this cut-up method, he is also notable for some of the foundational experiments with the limits of human perception of sound and the minimum quanta of a sound unit.

The history of this concept is long and complex but can generally be said to have begun in a modern sense with the work of Nobel Prize winning physicist Dennis Gabor's work on what

came to be known as Gabor Matrices. The mathematical details of his work lie outside the domain of this paper, but his central insight, as documented by Curtis Roads in his *Microsound*, was that

[A] quantum of sound was a concept of significance to the theory of hearing, since human hearing is not continuous and infinite in resolution. Hearing is governed by quanta of difference thresholds in frequency, time, and amplitude (see also Whitfeld 1978). Within a short time window (between 10 and 21 ms), he reasoned, the ear can register only one distinct sensation, that is, only one event at a specific frequency and amplitude. (59)

Meyer-Eppler followed Gabor's research, but with a more artistically oriented goal, explaining Gabor Matrices in a lecture also touching on the "Absolute Film" work of Oscar Fischinger and others (60). He also contributed to the pursuit of the limits of granularity of comprehensible sound; for example, as Roads writes:

He recognized that aural perception was limited in its time resolution, and estimated that the lower boundary on perception of parameter differences was of the order of 15 ms, about 1/66th of a second. The concept of time-segmentation was central to his notion of systematic sound transformation [...] For example, he described experiments with speech in which grains from one word could be interpolated into another to change its sense (59).

This should, I hope, echo nicely with Joyce's accomplishments in *Finnegans Wake*, but also puts Stockhausen's "cut-up" studies under Meyer-Eppler in the context of this very specific and scientific pursuit of the limits of material possibilities for meaning in sound.

Further along in the same Cott interview with the composer, Stockhausen says:

The basic principle underlying my whole attitude when I compose is the following: What occurs within single sounds in the micro-musical region is enlarged. [...] As soon as I compose a noise, for example — a single sound which is nonperiodic, within certain limits — then the wave structure of this sound is aleatoric. If I make a whole piece similar to the ways in which this sound is organized, then naturally the individual components of this piece could also be exchanged, permuted, without changing its basic quality. (70)

This is a fairly dense description containing a lot of ideas, some of which I will allow

Stockhausen to explain in his own words, some of which need to be parsed here before moving on. First, Stockhausen is describing his method as essentially *fractal*, in that the structures of micro-regions of sound correspond to structures of macro-regions. Fractals can, of course, be algorithmically generated, but are generally spoken of in terms of the remarkable frequency of their occurrence in nature (as made famous by Benoit Mandelbrot). Here, however, Stockhausen is referring to the wilful creation of an aperiodic sound (a single sound unit outside of a rhythm), and then analyzing what we could call its “sonic adumbrations,” whether through a spectrographic analysis or merely close attention to the partial tones making up the whole, and then basing a macro-structure of the piece on this “aleatoric” shape; “aleatoric” in this context not meaning the usual “generated by chance operations” but instead “being made up of sonic adumbrations outside the possibility of being controlled by the composer.” An A played on a piano, then analyzed, would not have the perfect shape of an abstract “A” written on sheet music. However, its wave forms could, in some ways, be considered “aleatoric,” and it is usually in this sense that Stockhausen is interested in chance and contingency — in terms of the uncontrolled textures and contours of microsounds and their fractal reflections at higher or broader structural levels. Stockhausen primarily thinks about contingency in the context of statistical (or chance operational) compositions, about which he says

the individual components enter into textures that have their own overall characteristics and become new units which are treated like sounds, but they have an inner life, which is composed. What is characteristic of statistical compositions, of aleatoric compositions in general, is that you can exchange the position of elements within given limits at random and it doesn't change the characteristics. Like changing the position of the tree's leaves. You can say: “This is a beech tree,” even if all the leaves have changed their position. (Cott, 74)

This quote perfectly illustrates how far Stockhausen's approach to the aleatoric is from contemporaries like Cage. For him, the introduction of statistical randomness serves only as a

compositional tool revealing fractal forms and more deeply complex sets of interrelations. It is also important to note that his use and appreciation for statistical analysis and aleatoric composition is directed only in the “downwards” or micro-direction, the macro-level or superstructure of the music is always determined either solely through his compositional choices or through a reading of these small moments transposed to a larger scale. He says “The statistic, the aleatoric, always applies to the small elements within larger gestalten” (75). These “*gestalten*” stands for the macrocosmic, superstructural element of a piece, as opposed to the aleatoric microsounds. Stockhausen describes his attention to the limits of microsound in relation to the larger gestalt as follows:

This is what I do in music. I go into the deepest possible layer of the individual sound. There’s always this change from the clear gestalt that you can grasp in just one listening to a piece – the very simple subdivisions and blocks. And if you dive into one block you discover multiplicity. In the multiplicity – “dividuality” – you discover individual figures again. Each individual figure has aleatoric components around itself, it becomes the nucleus of a new entity. Deeper and deeper. (76)

Stockhausen’s conception of complexity and the limits of expressible and comprehensible meaning in music is based on these concepts: the aleatoric vs. the gestalt, “dividuality” and fractal relationships. From the perspective of a listening subject, one first hears the superstructure, the “gestalt” level of sound, melodic series or harmonic moments impressing themselves onto our consciousness before fading in time. Upon deeper, or repeated listenings, micro-level sonic adumbrations appear as aleatoric textures, detailed to a level impossible for one to ever fully apprehend. Reaching this limit, a listener can return to the full structure of the piece and hear new connections, correspondences, and repetitions. The “infinite” in terms of the formlessness arising at the limits of perception occurs at two levels: first on the micro-level when we encounter the “hard” sensory limit of detectable microtextures of sound, then again on the macrolevel when our attempt to understand the piece as a whole is ruptured by the newly

acquired *unit of measurement* at our disposal. The “dividuality” or quanta with which we measure the piece is small enough that its mereological relationship to the piece as a whole is necessarily more complex than a listener can grasp. The “soft” limit encountered at the macro-level is our ability to apprehend the many ways in which these quanta of sound are deployed within a performed piece.

These individuated quanta of sound are not merely pitch-based, however; they are also expressive units of time. The more common way of thinking about quanta of sound would be to relegate time to the determinate of quantity and pitch to the quality, so that the idea of expressing a micro-unit of time would be redundant, time generally being the *term* that determines the quantity of a unit. Beyond Stockhausen’s use of frequency as a base for both tempo and pitch, this view is problematic in that it occludes units based on pitch differentiation; for example, the quanta of musical meaning expressed by the difference between two simultaneous notes a demi-tone apart or less, as well as spatial and textural differences. While the next section will deal with Stockhausen’s ideas on time in greater detail, it is important to understand his understanding of time in terms of *gestalt* vs. aleatoric texture as it is tied very closely to his conceptions of spatial and temporal changes in music.

To begin to understand Stockhausen’s conception and use of time-units it is important to first sharply divide the time-units immanent to a piece from the global tempo of a piece. Robin Maconie writes,

Stockhausen regards external tempo as simply an indication of the speed at which a listener experiences a piece of music. It is therefore not illogical to make a formal argument of the distinction between the musical event and the speed at which it is performed. If the speed is slower, we listen more carefully to the inner detail of the event; if faster, we perceive it more globally: provided the music is calculated to remain interesting at extremes of speed (it is) then varying the tempo of a segment from one performance another is no different from (say) photographing a building or a flower from a distance or close up: both are

legitimate. The notion that music must always be observed, as it were, from the same distance, as though it were a book which one had to hold always at arm's length in order to read is a visual, literary prejudice. (78)

External tempo is important, but mainly in terms of whether the audience's intentional listening will be directed more towards the *gestalt* of the piece or its textures — whether the audience is drawn more to the micro- or macro-elements of the piece. Maconie's belief that this is a “visual, literary prejudice” notwithstanding, I believe that both *Finnegans Wake* and *Ivan* are also possible to encounter at these sorts of varied “distances” or “speeds” although perhaps less literally, each sharing with *Gruppen* the need to absorb minute details and apply them to complex thematic or superstructural motifs and relationships. According to Maconie, for Stockhausen the external tempo is merely the frame for the experience, an extrinsic qualifier determining focus but not content per se. Immanent tempo, on the other hand, is regarded by Stockhausen as both a quantitative determinant of rhythm and periodicity (macrostructure) but also a *qualitative* determinant of microsound, specifically timbre. This is a rather involved process and I will let Stockhausen explain it at length.

The secret of timbre composition lies in the production of very specific cycles of rhythmic changes. At first it's not so important what these changes are because you speed them up to such an extent that the resulting timbre is a newly perceived unity. It has a certain characteristic, and you don't consciously analyze how it's composed in its microstructure, you can no longer analyze the original components once such a sound is obtained, since the same timbre can be obtained in many different ways. [...] The timbre is basically the result of a rhythmic microstructure which is speeded up enormously so that all the parameters become interchangeable somehow because you can determine a whole group position only as a sequence of dynamic changes. And if these dynamic changes, no longer heard as individual changes in a dynamic curve, occur fast enough to take the shape of the envelope of an individual cycle in, let's say, a periodic wave of a thousand cycles per second, then these dynamic changes produce the impression of timbre. (86–88)

Not only immanent to the piece, this conception of what Stockhausen calls the “microstructure” of time is also immanent to what an audience could perceive as a note or individuated quanta of

tone. The very idea of timbre is reduced to a low-level gestalt impression of what is underneath a complex microstructure of dynamic rhythmic cycles in much the same way that the gestalt impression of the whole work precedes the possibility of perceiving its constituent parts. In this way the fractal structure of the work, though finite, suggests a series of ever smaller worlds of sound, each “overcoming” the previous in terms of complexity and depth. Even the most attentive and attuned listener (an ideal listener to pair with the *Wake*’s ideal reader) will eventually hit a limit where a deeper, more complex level of sound is impossible to detect. The fractal relationships of the first levels, not to mention the massive amount of interrelations possible between these micro-units, suggests an infinite series of regressing sound worlds contained within the finite but “formless” hearable one. This is one of the ways in which the microstructure of the piece and its relation to the macrostructure can be said to evoke the mathematical sublime: it gives the subject a sense of an infinity of sound immanent to the piece. Although impossible to apprehend, the *understanding* of its complex structure and this impossibility shows a supersensible comprehension of the work and its “infinite” dynamic relationships. This still leaves many of the most obvious forms of tempo immanent to a piece unexplored, but they belong more properly to the next section and exploration of the lead-up to *Gruppen* and Stockhausen’s famous “.....how time passes.....”.

“.....how time passes.....”

Published in 1957, Stockhausen’s “.....how time passes.....” is a culmination of many extant musical ideas regarding the unity of pitch and rhythm under the rubric of “frequency.” This concept, appearing as early as 1910 in the writings of Ezra Pound (as mentioned by R. Schafer in his *The Tuning of the World*) highlights the fact that pitch and rhythm are both functions of

frequency separated only by human perceptual apparatus. Analogous to the *myth* of persistence of vision, frequencies whose periodicity is small enough to be perceived as continuous are received as pitch; those in excess of this boundary are perceived as rhythm. This concept is important for many elements of modern musical composition, including the relevant concept of “microsound.” Curtis Roads’s book on the topic covers this evolution, moving from Pound to Stockhausen and beyond, summarizing the relationship of the ideas as follows:

Inherent in the concept of microsound is the notion that sounds on the object time scale can be broken down into a succession of events on a smaller timescale. This means that the apparently continuous flow of music can be considered as a succession of frames passing by at a rate too fast to be heard as discrete events. This ideal concept of time division is ancient (consider Zeno of Elea's four paradoxes). It could not be fully exploited by technology until the modern age. (56)

By “fully exploited,” Roads is referring to computer-assisted or electronic compositional and sound recording methods, but the real Copernican shift was perspectival, not instrumental. For Stockhausen and other composers, including Xenakis and Babbitt, it was less the availability of electronic equipment and more the availability of new formal *models* for composition, including serialism and a conception of musical time not limited to the domain of rhythm. “.....how time passes.....” is Stockhausen’s fullest expression of this idea and its related compositional models and concepts. It is also a sprawling work described by Roads as a “raw outpouring of intellectual reflection,” (56) and many of its insights, although important for musical theory in general and Stockhausen’s development as a composer in particular, lie outside the interests of this paper. I will therefore be eliding several aspects of the article, including a section Roads (who also neglects to provide analysis) refers to as “some of the most arcane rhythmic notation ever devised” (73). My focus will remain on the particular aspect of Stockhausen’s model most applicable to *Gruppen* and my model of the mathematical sublime.

“.....how time passes.....” begins by describing music as consisting of “order-relationships in time,” our perception of which consists of distinguishing between various magnitudes of “alterations [between sound and silence] in an acoustic field” (10). These alterations, which Stockhausen calls “phases,” are either periodic or aperiodic and “between these extremes, we distinguish a greater or smaller number of transitional stages (as deviations from either periodicity or aperiodicity, depending on which one predominates)” (10). Our differentiation between these phases is *comparative*, Stockhausen explains how, “our sense-perception measures shorter or longer phases. Proportions serve for more exact definition — phase is twice, thrice as long as another” (10). These proportions are fixed based on a “quantum” then taken up and compared to other magnitudes in exactly the same manner as outlined by Kant in his first Critique. It is based on this simple definition of music, and a short, Kantian description of our differentiation of magnitudes, that Stockhausen elaborate his entire theory of temporality in music. The next step in the elaboration of this theory is the most important, and stated the most clearly, so I will quote it at length.

Our sense-perception divides acoustically-perceptible phases into two groups; we speak of *durations* and *itches*. This becomes clear if we steadily shorten the length of a phase (e.g., that between two impulses) from 1" to ½", to ¼", 1/8", 1/16", 1/32", 1/64", etc. Until a phase-duration is approx. 1/16", we can still just hear the impulses separately; until then, we speak of “duration,” if of one that becomes extremely short. Shorten the phase duration gradually to 1/32", and the impulses are no longer separately perceptible, one can no longer speak of the “duration” of a phase. The latter process becomes perceptible, rather, in a different way: one perceives the phase-duration as the “pitch” of the sound. 1/32" phase-duration makes us, say, “a ‘low’ note.” If a musician has learned to hear “absolute” pitches in the scale system as we have known it up to now, he will say he hears approximately double-bass B (.,B). But to recognize a pitch, the ear requires at least two equal phase-durations, otherwise it cannot “tune-in” — the “note” is too short. Our sense-perception cannot react to a single phase quickly enough to perceive it as “duration,” so it summarizes several quanta to give the sensory quality “pitch.” Steadily shorten the phase-duration still further, from 1/32" to 1/64" (.,B), 1/128" (B), 1/256" (b), etc., and the note ascends as a glissando from “low to high,” and we can still speak of clearly recognizable

pitches with phase durations up to approx. 1/16000", but exact pitch orientation gets lost in this time-sphere. Higher up still, we do not "hear" any more. (10)

The importance of this definition of music lies not only in its status as an interpretive or analytic model, but in its potential for transforming how one composes and even listens to music. As Stockhausen outlines, much of the history of music has been given over to a conception of musical sound wherein "pitch" and "rhythm" are separate terms, with the sorites paradox-inducing middle ground effaced or forgotten. Pitch, as a result, is seen as opposed to duration rather than a product of it; the centrality of time-values to *every* aspect of music is suppressed. Stockhausen places most of the blame for this on the "one-sided development of instrumental music, and of instrument construction. Instruments prepared with scale-tuning, and in increasing mechanization of note production [...] have eradicated the consciousness of what really happens when the 'pitch a' is produced" (11). For Stockhausen, what is possible after uncovering pitch and rhythm as time-values is an ability to *order* musical expression and detect order in musical expression on a more consistent continuum than before, as well as providing a new set of *relations* between which one might create correspondences and therefore meanings. There are, of course, many other ways to view this perspective, including experimental approaches more focused on contingency and emergence. However, Stockhausen is the composer whose response to the question of whether he sees silence as something that can be controlled was "Yes, it must be mastered" (Lee, "Interview for MODULATIONS"). For him, this system of "ordered relations in time" exists primarily as a means of communicating his specific artistic vision, and from that perspective, the view of music as frequency allows an unprecedented amount of artistic control and granularity of detail. Later in the same interview Stockhausen goes so far as to say that "We are almost a thousand years ahead of the visual artist, because we have a very precise language of vibrations, proportions of vibrations, and all our measurements of rhythms and relationships

between slow vibrations [and fast vibrations] are very developed in music” (Lee). A lot of the unique elements of Stockhausen’s personal approach to composition, and the concepts and motivations that influenced the shaping of *Gruppen* can be read into this statement. The efficacy of artistic expression, for Stockhausen, is tied directly to the *precision* and *breadth* of the artist’s possible range of expression. Precision here is indicated in terms of a holistic language of vibration as opposed to the artificially discrete terms of pitch and frequency, and breadth is indicated by the set of possible relations between these vibrations. Conceiving of the relationship between what are classically understood as the separate terms of pitch and rhythm as a relationship between various degrees of differentiation between like terms is the perspectival shift that allows for the incredible depth and breadth of musical expression represented by *Gruppen*. Understanding this relationship in terms of frequency is axiomatic for my thesis regarding the mathematical sublime as an interpretive model for *Gruppen* and music in general, so I will elaborate on its impact and implications a little longer before moving on to a look at the piece itself.

There are two major ways to look at the impact of a frequency-based concept of music: the phenomenological and the formal/relational. The phenomenological reception of sound is important for this approach because it is the only determinant of the musical value of groups or points on the continuum of frequencies. As Stockhausen makes clear above, it is only our perceptual apparatus that differentiates between vibrations experienced as “pitch” and those experienced as “rhythm,” allowing musical moments to occur in the “fuzzy” space between these two experiences, and thus allowing a listener to experience liminal states and impressions of formlessness or even of confusion. Additionally, a phenomenological view of the limits of perception allow for musical events occurring at or moving just beyond these limits, suggesting

formlessness in a different sense, more closely related to feelings of surpassing and going beyond perception. Blanchot's (and Derrida's) thought figure of the "*pas au-delà*" is useful here for understanding the importance of perceptual limits in terms of surpassings or overcomings referring us towards the concept of the infinite. The moment where a frequency, especially one moving upwards or downwards in a *glissando*, becomes impossible to perceive is the "*pas au-delà*" or "step (not) beyond" — our sense perception retreating to either a simultaneous sense impression of a concurrent frequency, or a retained impression of a previous frequency. Both of these retreats actively engage with the threshold of the "*au-delà*" while affirming the negation inherent in the step toward an uncrossable threshold. Another impact of this phenomenological aspect is the possibility for musical moments *highlighting* the fact that both rhythm- and pitch-type musical events are merely time-events. Examples of this include slowing a frequency to the point of confusion between the two perceptive modes, and having a drum "pitch" correspond with a drum "beat" around this same threshold. These types of effects are possible in instrumental music but are much easier to conceive of in electronically-composed music.

Stockhausen remarks that

Making a sound for a given composition, synthetically in a studio, demands that you listen very carefully to the inside of the sound that you're synthesizing, to all the partials, though you don't intend these partials to be heard as individual partials, but rather to use them to achieve a unified sound event. [...] I present a given sound spectrum for a rather long time so that you can follow the individual changes within the layers. It's like microscopic analysis. (32)

Part of the significance of *Gruppen* is the fact that he was able to compose a piece based on this degree of "microscopic analysis" without recourse to electronic composition.

The other way of looking at the implications of the shift to viewing sound as merely ordered time-events is the formal/relational. Rather than focusing on the subject's continuum of perception, this perspective shows us the power of a conception of music based on a *single*

numerable conception of sound. The range of possible applications for this mode of thinking about music is outside the scope of this paper, so I will merely provide a few examples. First, the formal principles of serialism originally, as Stockhausen points out, “had to do with that sphere of time-proportions which is perceived as pitch” (“...how time,” 12). He narrates how,

almost thirty years later, and after many detours, it occurred to composers to extend this principle into that sphere of time-proportions that we distinguish as durations. A *scale of twelve durations* was then added, which was intended to correspond to the chromatic scale of twelve pitches. (12)

This type of durational model ran into a number of problems, including the tendency of longer values to “devour” the shorter ones. The root of this problem is that “[b]ecause the fundamental phase serves as the unit of perception, the divided values are always referred to it” (17) — a description interesting for our purposes as it nearly exactly corresponds to Kant’s description of the taking up of magnitudes in the analytic of the sublime. Various solutions to this problem were created, including a type of polymodality resulting from the use of multiple durational scales (which, as Stockhausen points out, completely defeats the purpose of serialism since the intervals resulting from multiple durational scales can’t be serially ordered) (14). Viewing both macro time-events (rhythm) and micro time-events (pitch) as part of the same continuum allows for the creation of a proportion-series of *duration* intervals, the basis of which is the same proportional intervals that govern the *pitch* intervals. The consequences for this extend far outside of serialist composition, but even considered solely within that compositional domain the implications are broad. The existence of serially determinable intervals based on *fundamental durations* allows not only for unprecedented control over the dynamics of a piece, but unprecedented possibilities for the *relations* between the two classes of time events.

If we include the conception of timbre in terms of variable frequencies, we could imagine a piece in which the time-events usually perceived as “pitch,” “timbre,” and “rhythm” are all

based on a series of proportional relations. This would allow the piece to obtain, for example, a fractal structure involving ratios of recapitulations of forms, or any number of other proportionally related structures involving the micro and macro aspects of the piece. In order to get to this point, however, Stockhausen discusses a large range of possible solutions to the problem of creating an equivalent spectrum for these respective categories (pitch events, rhythm events, and timbre events) before settling on, for his own purposes, two sets of relations: an equal tempered set of relations for pitch and duration and a harmonically related series for super-structural phrases. It is worth noting that, although he does not strictly say this, this solution is still a “compromise” in that it creates two sets of relations when he implies one could base the interrelations of an entire piece on a single fundamental ratio (26). Curtis Roads describes the next steps of Stockhausen’s theoretical development:

With this harmonically related hierarchy as his premise, Stockhausen proposes that other serial operations be used to create elaborate networks of harmonic proportions. By deleting some notes and tying others, for example, ever more complicated relationships can arise. Such transformations lend a sense of aperiodicity to the rhythmic structure, which Stockhausen compares to the aperiodic microstructure of noise. Addressing a practicality of performance, Stockhausen writes that if certain rhythms cannot be realized by instrumentalists synchronized by a single conductor, then the instrumentalists can be divided into groups and synchronized by separate conductors (a procedure employed in his *Gruppen* for three orchestras). (75)

We can see here how the theories of “.....how time passes....” not only inform *Gruppen* but led to its conception. The possibilities for interrelation created by viewing music as “order relationships in time” lead to his interest in ever more complex ways of expressing these possibilities. One way of viewing *Gruppen*, then, is as a sort of model for testing the possibilities of interrelation and ordered complexity in music, a model that I suggest can be understood *theoretically* in terms of the type of limit-testing I associate with the evocation of the mathematical sublime. *Gruppen* was not, of course, the first such model, and many of

Stockhausen's works from the 1950s can be considered experiments in this line, notably the "Piano Piece" series, as well as *Zietmasze* and, postdating *Gruppen*, his *Carre* for four orchestras. In the interest of space, I will not be including analyses or descriptions of these pieces but will let Robin Maconie explain what sets *Gruppen* apart from these works:

Before *Gruppen* Stockhausen defined a group in either procedural or perceptual terms. In the procedural sense, the group is a serial strategy to replace the pointillist aesthetic of total contrast by a richer hierarchy of degrees of contrast among various parameters. In the perceptual sense, group composition acknowledges the fact that musical formations exceeding certain boundaries of subtlety, polyphonic complexity, density, noisiness, or speed are perceived globally rather than in individual detail. Neither definition has anything specific to say about the internal structure of a group: indeed, the external criteria of similarity and speed admit a considerable freedom of choice in the internal distribution of group material, manifestly demonstrated in the formal indeterminacy of Piano Piece XI, the impulse showers of *Gesang der Jünglinge*, and the superimposed tempi of *Zeitmasze*. The groups of *Gruppen* are something new: they are precisely determined in their time structures, and for that reason subject to refined control. Essentially they are microstructures of points, pointillistic microcompositions speeded up into the time domain where group perceptions supersede individual distinctions. (87)

Although Maconie is focusing on the concept of groups in particular, this distinction holds true for a number of the composer's other theoretical concerns. *Gruppen* is the "test-case" par excellence, the one piece where Stockhausen attempted to compose with the highest degree of control over every aspect the sound. I will return to Maconie's description of the "microcompositions" (which belong to the realm of timbre composition) in the next passage, as I describe different approaches to the experience of hearing the piece itself.

Gruppen

There are three different aspects of *Gruppen*, each corresponding to a term governing the piece's creation: "time," "serialism," and "space." Under the first we can point to Stockhausen himself, as his ".....*how time passes*....." remains the best exposition of the temporal concepts behind

Gruppen. Under the sign of “serialism” we must name Imke Misch, whose 1999 book (based on her dissertation of the previous year) *Zur Kompositionstechnik Karlheinz Stockhausen: Gruppen für Drei Orchester* was the first serious full-length study of the piece, providing superb analysis of the serial shaping of the piece with particular focus on the serial aspects of its genesis and shaping. Under the third term, “space,” we can name Sara Overholt, whose 2006 dissertation *Karlheinz Stockhausen’s Spatial Theories: Analyses of Gruppen für drei Orchester and Oktophonie, Elektronische Musik vom Dienstag aus LICHT* is a superlative look at the spatial aspects of Stockhausen’s piece which goes so far as to innovate a notation system for describing the spatial movements of sound in the piece. These divisions remain, of course, somewhat artificial, as each commentator also covers many other categories or aspects of the work, but this superficial division can give us some insight into the characteristics of the piece each approach foregrounds. This is not merely a matter of formal critical engagement, however, as these approaches can represent different ways in which one can *listen* to the work. To make an analogy, a great work of literary analysis, McHoul and Wills’ *Writing Pynchon*, begins with an explanation of how a work as densely plotted and populated as *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be read, even on a somewhat superficial plot level, in a variety of ways. McHoul and Wills thus begin their text with a series of contradictory plot summaries, each beginning with the incantation “So we are still reading *Gravity’s Rainbow*, like this...” (24) In this spirit, these two sections can be read as a type of “So we are still listening to *Gruppen*, like this:”, a tactic meant to highlight not only the multiple *modes* of listening with which one might approach the work, but also another way of emphasizing the inherent multiplicity and deep complexity of the work itself. The temporal aspect, under Stockhausen’s signature, has been mostly covered in the course of our look at his “....how time passes....”. Consequently, we will first follow Misch through a look at

some of the serial concepts that went into the work's genesis, before examining some of the innovative interpretive work of Sara Overholt's spatial theories.

Listening for Serialism (Genetic Criticism)

Harvey's description of *Gruppen* as the most involved of European total serial works despite the freedom of the details, refers to the degree to which Stockhausen expanded the general tonal domain of serialism to include tempo. However, this description also refers to the fact that after conceiving of the piece as a rigorously ordered "total serialist" work, Stockhausen returned and added sections which, as Imke Misch points out, "almost completely relinquished serially controlled predeterminations" (145). She goes on to explain that it is precisely these insertions, however, which allowed the three orchestras to be "combined into a single sounding body, whereby the acceleration and deceleration of a synchronized musical flow of motion stand in the foreground" (145). Despite this "freedom in the details," one can still listen to *Gruppen* with utmost attention to its serialist structure, particularly if one has absorbed the background information on *Gruppen*'s formation — a model of listening analogous to that of the *Finnegans Wake* reader with access to the drafts of the text, or even a general structural layout of the book: the work is transformed. Imke Misch's dissertation, as well as the translated version of her fourth and fifth chapters, "On the Serial Shaping of Stockhausen's *Gruppen für drei Orchester*," are representative of this approach, as she is the first to analyze *Gruppen* with a serious knowledge of the materials leading to its creation as well as having undergone an analysis of "....how time passes...." (145). By looking at the broad conclusions Misch draws as to the meaning of the work as a totality, and then at her analysis of the details of the work, we will be able to see how listening in the mode of serialism can provide insight into the correspondences between the

work's structure and the concept of the mathematical sublime, as well as its potential to evoke the sublime in a listener.

In a statement directly contradicting Sara Overholt, Misch begins her article on *Gruppen*'s serial shaping with the statement that

[T]he movement of sound through space does not stand as a matter of priority at the centre of the conception of the work. Rather its outward configuration must be regarded as the consequence of an inner necessity, stemming from matters of compositional technique as well as of aesthetics. Embedded in the context of the serial thinking and composing which grew up around 1950, *Gruppen* is based on the decisive idea of integrating the musical space-time dimensions in the sense of a principle which brings about coherence and has an effective serial control, not only on the parametrical, but also on the larger formal level. (143–144)

In the context of our discussion we can understand this as an inherently *genetic* claim as to the role of coherence on and *between* the micro- and macro-levels of the piece. Rather than simply proceeding from a naïve listening position, Misch uses the background of Stockhausen's notes and essays to explain how *Gruppen*'s structure emerges from the theoretical concepts immanent to its inception. Part of Misch's genetic investigation is, as we have mentioned, based on the division between those totally ordered and somewhat free sections of the compositional process of the piece, but her aim is to show the essential *unity* that this process brings to the music, rather than any possible disjunction. Her main thesis is that

[A]t the centre of the compositional process stands the idea of a structural integration of the space-time dimensions, in connection with which the principle of deriving all musical qualities of the piece from a single initial series is also decisive. The associated struggle for the greatest possible unity and coherence on the structural level may be seen to be just as characteristic of Stockhausen's compositional creations as is the direct integration of time and space. (173)

Misch explains how Stockhausen accomplishes this through a complex conjunction between the pointillist composition techniques and resultant "static" sound endemic to early serialism compositions and his concept of "groups," a technique whereby Stockhausen "modified his pre-

ordering methods to the effect that no longer should it be parameters of individual notes but rather the predominant characteristic of a group of notes that are fixed with the aid of a series” (144). Note that this in no way broadens the base “quanta” or smallest controllable unit in the piece, it merely adds another controllable *level* at which another set of ordered relations might occur. The group compositional technique maintains the earlier “pointillist” technique usually associated with serialism while allowing for broader connections at a group level, as well as the interrelation of the groups on the broadest superstructural level of the composition as a whole. This innovation, for Misch, “marks a peak in the history of serial music in general in that this new structural principle fulfills the demand for unity and perfection in a hitherto unique fashion” (149).

From this we can garner two ideas regarding the notion of complexity in *Gruppen*. First, in contrast to a composer such as Iannis Xenakis, Stockhausen’s insertion of seemingly extra-theoretical moments is *integral* to the formal “perfection” of the piece, not an afterthought appended to make the work conform to a particular aesthetic sensibility.³⁴ The idea of integrating the “free” sections both predates the serial ordering and is, as Misch points out, that which gives *Gruppen* its “dramaturgical” character (149). Second, the type of complexity represented by *Gruppen* is one oriented towards unity but, as this unity is a *global* one occurring at each level of sound, it is not completely hearable, as many of these sounds are either impossible to process simultaneously or pass outside the range of human apprehension. A genetic reading of Stockhausen’s notes and drafts may give one an ability to comprehend this complexity, as would, importantly, the simple act of repeated listenings with an ear for different qualities (much like these three readings of the piece would suggest); however, this is still the grasping of a quality

³⁴ For a counterexample involving Xenakis, see Gibson, *The Instrumental Music of Iannis Xenakis*, xviii.

through reason and not apprehension, as this synthesis is entirely abstracted from the phenomenal process. Moreover, the type of reading suggested by Misch is explicitly academic, and relies on a deep knowledge of the score as well as the genetic materials. In short, that the work aspires to a “perfect” unity is evident, and that it attains it is possible, but that it is hearable outside the world of the Stockhausen critic is, at least in Misch’s reading, not likely. What then, we might ask, would be the purpose of the incredibly complex background details? Roger Smalley provides one response, writing

to perceive the macro-structure of *Gruppen* is to “appreciate” the work to exactly the same depth as one “appreciates” a Beethoven symphony by recognizing the motives, subjects, modulations, movements, etc. To expect to perceive more would be like asking to perceive every single harmony, passing note, and accompaniment figure in the Beethoven to the same depth as the major structural elements listed above. Because of the speed at which music moves the brain is quite unable to do this, of course, a fact of which Stockhausen is highly aware — as was Schoenberg, who only asked that listeners should perceive his rows in their most foreground manifestations, that is as themes and melodies. What then, one might ask, is the need for all the unhearable complexities? The basic answer is that without them the composition would simply not exist, because this work is a titanic struggle to actualize conceptions and it is the polarity between idea and formulation that gives *Gruppen* its Beethovenian strength. (794)

While this is undoubtedly an excellent response, it has much in common with the injunction to simply read *Finnegans Wake* without delving into its deep polysemy, which precludes the whole critical world of exploration as well as many other modes of engagement with the text, academic or not. While we will not delve as deep as Misch and Overholt, some exploration of these “unhearable complexities” will be necessary for understanding *Gruppen*’s structure, as well as for appreciating the serialist mode of listening and its attendant world. Before turning to some of the more interesting specifics of Stockhausen’s serial shaping of *Gruppen*, it will be helpful to overview some of the generalities of his compositional process.³⁵

³⁵ As has hopefully been made clear thus far, it is difficult to overstate the complexity of *Gruppen* or the process by which it was composed. As this is not a music-theory paper, a great deal of these complexities will be necessarily

Following the insight (garnered from experiments in playing impulses at varying speeds and noting a subject's perception of their quality) that rhythm and pitch are merely impressions on the same continuum of time-events, Stockhausen developed a system of twelve durations corresponding to the twelve tones of the chromatic scale. The key to mapping these two sets in a one-to-one relationship was based on Stockhausen's key observation that we do not perceive durations *absolutely*, but *relatively*. And, even in terms of relative temporal perception, we are inclined to perceive not *difference* simpliciter, but *proportions*. As he points out in "...how time passes....",

If a first phases lasts 1", and a second phase 2", there is a difference of 1". Two phases of 11" and 12" duration have the same difference of 1". But we perceive the difference between [the first] as relatively large, whereas the same difference [between the second pair] is hardly perceptible. (11)

This led him to conceive of a serially-ordered concept of duration-units as equal divisions of a "fundamental phase," proportions between metronomic durations corresponding to the pitch proportions of a chromatic scale (A = MM 60, A# = MM 63.6, etc.). These metronomic durations were then assigned to a series of "octaves" with the highest notes corresponding to the shortest metronomic values, a process allowing him to not only serially *order* duration units, but order them *in relation to pitch values*.

Gruppen's governing twelve-tone series (above, p.248) is pair of ordered hexachords, the consequent (second six notes) being a transposed inversion of the antecedent (first six notes). This is an all-interval row, meaning it covers all the pitches and intervals of the chromatic scale, as well as being a transposed palindromic row with a tritone dividing the two hexachords in each direction, making them cyclical. Regarding the particularities of Stockhausen's choice of tone

elided. What follows is, then, a simplification of some of the more important concepts in the shaping of *Gruppen*, followed by some of Misch's more pertinent observations. Any summaries, particularly of pitch-content, can be understood as deriving from similar summaries undertaken by Misch, Overholt, Maconie, and Stockhausen himself.

rows, Misch and Overholt have both worked to definitively show that the formerly accepted claim that Stockhausen's thinking was underdeveloped compared to his contemporaries, such as Babbitt. Overholt in particular has developed a convincing, if incredibly esoteric, argument that one of the factors in Stockhausen's tone-row selection was his ability to inscribe it with his own signature (Overholt, 12–45). Misch's argument is less comprehensive, but more applicable here, as she points out that his use of the mirror-formed hexachords is remarkable for reflecting Stockhausen's interest in the idea that "almost all organizational fundamentals and forms are, so to speak, developed out of or derived from a single, small, but at the same time exceedingly complex and versatile, adaptable core element" (160). It is worth remarking that this idea of Stockhausen's is almost completely formal in its abstraction. We can just as easily take this to refer to the power of Peano's postulates to generate something as complex as Fermat's last theorem, or to the artistic combinatorial possibilities of a limited digital color spectrum. Like Joyce and Eisenstein, the thinking behind *Gruppen* is expressly formal in the sense that many of the ideas are abstract and non-media-specific: the formal lessons learned here may be applied elsewhere. In terms of the audience's possible *reception* of this concept, it manifests in several aspects of the performance, most obviously in the fact that the opening chord (whose echo will ring metaphorically throughout the piece) is composed of the complete second hexachord with the addition of a seventh note (G#), the salient interval of which is the tritone (D–G#), thus allowing an attentive listener to grasp not only a fundamental chord but the fundamental interval governing the piece. We will see other manifestations of this concept under the "space" category below.

Beyond the particularities of Stockhausen's base tone-row selection, a fundamental aspect of the piece from a genetic or serially-focused point of view is how this base tone-row

relates to the eleven consecutive tone-rows (each also containing all the intervals and tones) it has generated, the whole piece being based on twelve twelve-tone series. The most interesting aspect of these series is how they are expressed not only as ordered intervals, but as ordered proportions. Misch explains how

By analogy to the overtone relationships to a fundamental tone, Stockhausen [...] expressed the eleven intervals of the series as proportions. In doing so, he observed on the one hand the direction of motion of the intervals, [note, p. 181: For example a descending major third corresponds to the proportion 10:8, and an ascending major third to the proportion 8:10.] as well as the extension of an interval by one or two additional octaves. On the other hand, Stockhausen considered the serial premise that all elements are equal, for he took care of the idea that within the formation of those eleven proportions each ordinal between 2 and 13 should be used as numerator and denominator only once. [...] From this point of view the initial series must [...] be construed as a cyclical construction that is subsequently “opened” eleven times between some of the links. In the process the basic sequence of links is maintained, but at the same time constantly varied, such as might be the case with a multicolored string of wooden beads, where the succession of colors is preserved but the form or size of the beads changes every time. (164–5)

Misch goes on to explain in great detail not only the genesis and method by which Stockhausen ordered the tone-rows in *Gruppen*, but also how these tone-rows are later used to generate the particular rhythmic and pitch-based structures of each section of the piece and its corresponding groups, as well as the further subdivisions (some sections and groups have superordinate or subordinate governing qualities, also serially determined). She accomplishes this by relying on a combination of Stockhausen’s notes and sketches, “...how time passes...”, and the score itself to flesh out his process. While following step by step through this remarkable work of exposition and genetic research is far outside the scope of this text, some particular features should be mentioned.

Following the division into sections, subsequent division into groups, and the serial determination of each element’s pitch-characteristics, Stockhausen’s next step was made in light

of the “idea of a structural continuum of time and space” discussed above in order to “determine the overall musical qualities of each group” (Misch, 170). Using the premise that each semitone corresponds to a tempo as well as a duration unit (quarter note, half note, etc.), Stockhausen then integrated the governing interval series to these tempos and durations on a micro-level. Misch explains some of this process as follows:

In conformity with the premise that each semitone represents a group of pitches and that this semitone is responsible for the specific properties of those pitches, the tempo and the fundamental duration [...] of a group depend upon the absolute pitch of a note. Since the fundamental duration is represented by a single value only, and since the specific ration of each pitch to its foregoing and following pitch — excluding the first and last pitches — is to be transposed into the group’s relations of duration, the numerator and denominator of the intervallic relationships served as values for the determination of these duration proportions in each group. In the process because of doubled usage of the proportion, temporal overlappings of groups were produced. [...] The denominator of a proportion gives the number of fundamental durations per group; in the further course of the serial organization process, these fundamental durations were provided with a “formant spectrum” before being worked out musically. (170)

Two of these ideas are of great importance for understanding *Gruppen* and the relationship between its genesis and the types of listening it might engender: “overlappings” and “formant spectrum.”

The fact of temporal overlapping as a consequence of serial ordering methods is important from a genetic perspective since as it resulted in the problem of up to three groups having simultaneously different speeds. Stockhausen’s solution to this problem was his innovation of using three orchestras led by their own conductors. This is an important facet of the creation of *Gruppen* as it illustrates how most, if not all, of the most obvious complexities of the piece were *generated* by the structural idealities Stockhausen conceived *a priori*. This is cognate with the notion of formal complexity being generated by apparently simple concepts, but also illustrates the deeply conceptual nature of the piece. The choices leading to its creation were

generated less by creative contingencies than by an attempt to adhere to the ideal of all of its constituent parts being coherently related under the signs of “unity” and “perfection” — concepts which led him to work in the direction of smaller and smaller units of expressible meaning (smaller and more controllable duration and pitch units) as well broader and more interconnected unity at the superstructural level (serial ordering of every level of relation).

The process of creating the “formant spectrum” was essentially the last, highly complex step of composition Stockhausen undertook. Again, the details of this stage lie far outside the scope of this paper (and in fact, are occluded in every article and book on *Gruppen* excepting Misch’s dissertation and the resulting book), but the general content of this step is still important for understanding the process of the piece’s composition. Misch, quoting “...how time passes...” summarizes it as follows:

Each formant spectrum consists of rhythmic layers which, on the basis of a further, very complex serial principle, were provided with horizontally and vertically determined musical characteristics (and subsequently with still further ones); the resulting “[group] formant spectrum will then be seen as a unitary time-complex, characterized by its total duration, envelope-curve...average speed, speed tendency, average intensity, density, density progression, sonority (which group or combination of instruments), sound-form, movement in pitch, harmonic field, and so on” [...] and corresponds finally to the general image of a group, which is fixed in the score. (185)

How can we relate this final process to our understanding of *Gruppen*’s complexity and formal relation to the infinite? All of the above *qualities* — “average speed,” etc. — are divisions and sub-divisions of sound magnitudes usually understood as possessing at most three or four characteristics (timbre, pitch, duration), expanded by Stockhausen not only in their iterative qualities, but in the extent to which these might be controlled. This process simultaneously creates two inaccessibly dense “fronts” of sound: the micro-level of timbre and *quality*, and the macro-level where these minute qualities are deployed in a highly ordered field. Both of these

fronts operate on the concept of *relations*, however, and must be understood in this sense. It is only as *part of a field* that instruments are capable of expressing this level of complexity, as many of the above terms illustrate. “Sonority” and “density progression,” for example, can only be expressed as *group* characteristics; that is, a quality expressed through the set of relations between independently determined sound-events. When we, as listeners to *Gruppen*, direct our attention towards any individual instrument (excepting solos), we are not accessing a deeper level of *Gruppen*; instead, the horizon of meaning slips away as we lose the ability to hear its place within the set of relations and differentials that make up the micro- and macro-structure of the piece. This is one of the primary ways in which lessons from the genesis of the piece can help us understand *Gruppen* as evoking the sublime: its structure embodies a complexity irreducible to any particular moment of density; the process of composition *generated* this complexity as a set of ordered relations between its constituent parts. When we listen with an ear for the process of composition, we can hear, for example, the governing hexachords, and the relations between tempos. This is, in fact, an incredibly enlightening “mode” or determinate “world” from which to listen to the piece, but it only serves to highlight, not diminish, its inaccessibility, complexity, and possibility for evoking intimations of the infinite.

Space

The novelty of the spatial component of *Gruppen* is most immediately apparent in that the piece is performed by three orchestras arranged in a semi-circle, each with their own conductor. Already, we can begin to consider the musical effects of this spatial arrangement, namely that similar notes played simultaneously by different performers on the same instrument — for example, two bassoons playing notes a half-tone apart — would, in any traditional

orchestral arrangement be indistinguishable. In the orchestral arrangement of *Gruppen* these notes could be distinguished, or differentiated, because of their separate locations in space. Another, less apparent spatial innovation is the presence of spatial figures or movements in the composition of the piece, figures made possible by his use of the titular compositional “groups.” In an effort to avoid familiar sounds and harmonies, Stockhausen composed *Gruppen* as a series of “groups” or sound-clusters, sometimes constrained to one section of one orchestra, but often overlapping several. One effect of a score written as a series of groups, despite there being a governing superstructure, is the emergence of sound clusters moving from specific areas of one orchestra to another. This draws the audience’s attention from place to place, creating a very specific and “guided” spatial awareness. When witnessing the piece live, the audience’s attention is moved across the three orchestras by either melodic movements or harmonic convergences, creating wedges, lines, and other shapes both between orchestras and within them. As pointed out by David Toop in his liner notes quoted above, this is often the most salient aspect of *Gruppen*, especially those moments where all three orchestras play simultaneously.

The concept of salience features prominently in the work of Sara Overholt, whose dissertation on Stockhausen includes a chapter entitled “A Theory of Shapes in *Gruppen*,” which begins with a direct negation of Misch’s claim regarding the genesis of *Gruppen*:

Stockhausen has said that his primary compositional aim in *Gruppen* was about defining shapes in the air above the audience. He even speaks of “triangular rotations” and other such spatial movements of sound even though there are no literal motions called for by the performers. (46)

Using this description, and the “sound categories” of Robin Maconie as a jumping-off point, Overholt creates not only a detailed description (prioritizing “aural salience”) of the sound shapes of *Gruppen*, but an entire notation system with which to describe them. This suggests not only an innovative *reading* of *Gruppen*, but an entire formal interpretive system designed as a

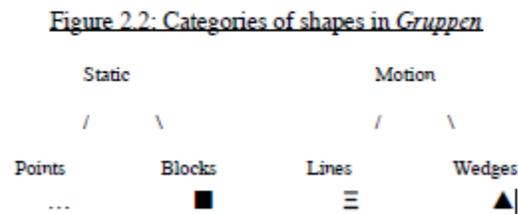
response to the demands *Gruppen* exerts upon its listeners and critics.

Although they differ greatly, the comparison she provides between her own system and Maconie's serves as a good introduction to her concept of shape-notation. Maconie's categories for sound in *Gruppen*, taken from his *The Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen*, include Points, Groups, "Reverse-Groups," and long sounds prolonged by continuous agitation (Overholt, 49). Overholt's roughly corresponding (but far more specific) categories include Points or Lines, Wedges, Wedges and Blocks. These shapes fall into two categories: "motion" shapes and "static" shapes:

Motion shapes begin in one location and lead the listener to follow the completion of the shape at another location. Simply put, motion shapes *move*. Static shapes, as their name implies, are produced in a given sound location, but do not necessitate motion of any kind towards another location. Within each of these two main categories, I have also identified two important sub categories: static shapes include "points" and "blocks" and motion shapes include "lines" and "wedges." (Overholt, 50) (see below, 300, for a reproduction of her illustration.)

Points, in her terminology, correspond roughly to those "pointillist" moments mentioned above, the individuated sound moments whose main *relational* quality to the superstructure of *Gruppen* occurs on the periodic and timbral level rather than the harmonic or dynamically spatial. Blocks are, similarly, mostly timbral in their relational quality, but emerge as distinct shapes within one or, occasionally, two orchestras. This shape may also form the beginning or end of a movement shape, specifically that of the edge of a wedge shape, in which instance she refers to them as "walls." "Lines" are, as might be expected, similar to points, but, after beginning with a small group of instruments, shift to another section of the orchestra through a variety of methods — "a timbral shift from one orchestra to another is by far the most common method" (Overholt, p. 53). The final shape, the "Wedge," is the most common, beginning with either a "point" or a "wall" shape and moving towards the other in either a left-to-right, right-to-left, or front-to-back

movement. These shapes (especially points and lines) may occur simultaneously (although it is rare), but if so are “separated from one another by certain factors so that the individual lines are aurally discernible” (53)



After creating this lexicon of possible shapes, Overholt assigns each a simple visual representation (as shown in the accompanying figures) with which she is able to notate *Gruppen* according to the movements of sound occurring *relative to the audience*. Besides being an incredibly innovative way of *reading* and providing critical response to *Gruppen*, this approach is most remarkable for the way in which it serves as a visual representation of the specific type of listening that *Gruppen* engenders in its audience. Her reliance on “aural salience” as a guide to notation gives a clear indication of this prioritization of the *phenomenal* experience of *Gruppen* rather than the genetic or structural. Which is not to say that the structural or formal aspects of the piece disappear; on the contrary, her attention to the shapes of *Gruppen* highlights some formal organizational and relational aspects of the piece that would have otherwise been critically neglected (although certainly perceptible to an attentive listener). An excellent example of this would be her description of Section 6, groups 114–122:

Perhaps the most beautiful and memorable section of *Gruppen* is Section 6. It contains the monumental moment that many authors, reviewers and students alike have noted as an incredible musical event where a single brass chord seems to fly through the air from orchestra to orchestra over the top of the audience. [...] The shapes in this section culminate at the climactic midpoint of Group 119 in the

establishing the mirrored gesture as a core spatial movement that recurs in various guises throughout the course of the work. In the course of the chapter she provides spatial descriptions and diagrams for the entirety of the piece, allowing her to draw interesting global conclusions, including one that “the pieces as a whole starts but simple presentations of shapes and their interactions, and gradually but consistently becomes more and more complex” (84). This is an incredibly important point for our purposes as it shows how *even on the level of spatial forms* Stockhausen’s piece works through the presentation of discrete magnitudes and their relations before integrating them into the complex, but still ordered, superstructure of the work as a whole.

The notion of *development* in *Gruppen* makes it an ideal piece for illustrating the possibility of a formal-artistic model of the mathematical sublime. It presents “simple” (discrete and functionally irreducible) magnitudes and sets of relations between those magnitudes, in terms of the shapes described by Overholt; it also presents the time-events *as serially ordering magnitudes* as well as *timbral micro-textures*, before integrating them into a superstructure so complex that, as has been remarked by almost every critic and analyst, the synchronic organization (that is, the global set of relations over time, the *horizontal*) as well as many individual moments of diachronic content (that is, any moment’s timbral and harmonic relations, the *vertical*) are *inaccessible* to human perception. It is not that the piece tends towards formlessness, it is that its form is complex to the point where our experience of it exceeds the imagination, becomes impossible to apprehend, overwhelms the senses. It is also not, on the other hand, a question of a *surplus* of form. The formal complexity is, in fact, necessary for the piece to have its effect: it needs to surpass the limit of perception in order to point outwards. The *finite* set of relations that make up the piece suggests the infinite to the listener through order, not formlessness. In *Gruppen* we can broadly say that this set of relations is (metaphorically, not

mathematically) fractal, in that smaller-scale relations recapitulate at higher orders, and the entire global complexity of repetition and recursion is generated by a relatively simple rule set. This fractal density (vertical and horizontal) is emphasized by Overholt at the conclusion of her chapter, as she writes

I must emphasize again that my shape types are only generalizations, since each shape as it occurs in the work sounds unique in some way: that is, there is always at least one musical parameter — duration, timbre, orchestration, etc. — which causes each shape to sound different from any other. (91)

She goes on to develop another theory for one of these parameters (that of the three-dimensional quality of some of the shapes) in her next chapter, but this explanation should serve to illustrate the *mereological* aspect of any description of or even *act of attentive listening* to *Gruppen*: it must necessarily be radically incomplete, as there are always other parameters within the horizon to turn your attention to, and, therefore, entirely new ordered relations to experience. Repeated listening to the piece opens up these horizontal possibilities, allowing one's listening habits to become attuned to the particularities of *Gruppen's* microtextures and global adumbrations and orders, but even within this hermetic sound-world, one is always grasping at the limits of the horizon, the suggestion of the infinite. Overholt's work is one of the most innovative and penetrating ways of investigating the sound-world of *Gruppen*, but it simultaneously exemplifies the limits of listening, showing how selective (and therefore occlusive) our attentive consciousness must be to particular aspects of the piece in order to even begin to grasp their complexity.

Conclusion

A final question, elided so far, remains. If the sublime can be reduced to an *effect* of a particular formal complexity, does this not rob it of its transformative power? The type of sublimity this

chapter has been addressing seems like it can only be thought of in terms of instantiation, not transformation. One listens, aware, attuned to the particularities of *Gruppen*, and yet the microstructures and the macrostructures both evade, recede into formlessness, leaving only an intimation of their perfection, the complex set of relations each micro-point embodies. Our sensibilities shrink, but our reason grasps the whole, and in this moment we experience a sense of the sublime. More to the point, the *model* of the sublime provides a point of access for the piece, allows us to understand its importance and its possible effects, and gives us a vocabulary that can unite the idea of its creator with the ideas of its critics, binding it to other works of the era in a shared utopianism of form. Clearly the first is subsumed to the second, as this chapter has been far more about using the sublime as a model than as an *experience* per se, but does this entirely diminish the experience? Have we, in positing the sublime as a model, entirely exsanguinated it? I will attempt to address these questions more globally in my conclusion to this dissertation, but in the context of Stockhausen I will briefly provide a response.

To reduce the sublime to merely a model would certainly diminish its conceptual (not to mention experimental) import, but one must also be wary of erring on the side of the experiential. If we posit the mathematical sublime as being possible to evoke through art, there is always the danger of reducing the experience to merely that of *frisson*. David Huron's work in the cognitive psychology of music, covered in his *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Anticipation*, deals with many of the *effects* of music one could associate with the sublime; he in fact references the term in its Burkean and Kantian incarnations in the context of the notions of "contrastive valence" (n., 383). Put simply, a contrastive valence theory addresses the "magnitude of positive and negative emotions. How we ultimately feel about an event is not simply tied to an appraisal of some absolute benefit or penalty associated with that event. Our

feelings also seem to depend on limbic contrast” (Huron, 25). While developing a musical theory of limbic contrast, Huron basically puts forth a cognitive theory of the sublime. Predicated on the difference between “fast track brain” responses and slower “appraisal” responses, Huron explores aesthetic experiences which contrast “negatively valenced piloerection reponse[s]” to “neutral or positively valenced appraisal reponse[s],” and how “the magnitude of [the] contrast amplifies an overall sense of pleasure” (35). He goes on to show how *frisson* is generally produced by passages of music which exploit this differential, evoking a negative piloerection response evoked by surprise at our expectations not being met, or simply at a burst of unexpected sound and then, following that, a positive appraisal response or a rational moment involving the reduction of the perceived threat level: “the sounds themselves will inevitably lead to the conclusion that the stimulus is ‘just music.’ Unlike the growling of a bear, the sounds do not represent an imminent danger” (37).

By now the extent to which this mirrors the concept of the Kantian mathematical sublime should be clear. Experiments by researchers such as Huron contribute greatly to the psychological and physiological study of music, and in terms of analyzing the *experiential* content of *frisson*, for instance, have much more to say than a philosophical analysis devoid of real data ever could. Many concrete questions regarding the experience of music can and should be answered through this type of experimental scientific analysis; however, something is undoubtedly lost in the transition from an abstract philosophical concept of the sublime to a concrete, functional scientific concept of *frisson*. One of the losses should be obvious in this context: the formal application of a concept across media. I have developed this concept of the sublime in *Gruppen* specifically in the hopes that it will “echo” properly with my parallel analyses of *Ivan* and the *Wake* — a type of echo that is lost in the notion of *frisson*, and in

experimental analyses in general. More importantly, the notion that the experience of the sublime can lead to some sort of revelatory understanding disappears. Although I have more or less elided this point in the course of this chapter, hopefully its shape remains clear.

The model of the mathematical sublime, applied to *Gruppen*, illuminates certain formal aspects of its shape and conception, as well as highlighting its place in modernist musical and general artistic culture, but it also provides an explanation of why some of the work emerging from its study is so innovative. While Misch's work remains nominally within the domain of pitch- and tempo-based musical analysis, her reliance on genetic materials and the incredible depths to which she was required to go to construct a theory of the serial shaping of *Gruppen* set her work out as remarkable in recent musical studies. Overholt's work, on the other hand, is innovative in every respect. Even excepting her postulate regarding the motivation behind the tone-rows of *Gruppen*, and other aspects of her work which I have not commented on, she produced an entirely novel *critical annotative form* with which to describe *Gruppen*. This brings us to the final element of the Kantian sublime, the proposed outcome of the ascension of the supersensible over the sensible. An ascension which I propose is a contributing factor to the excellent critical work the piece engenders. Like the *Wake* and *Ivan*, the formal complexities of *Gruppen* are such that in-depth critical responses must *necessarily* arise from critics whose supersensible understanding of the piece is couched in the experience of the sublime — that moment of instantiation whereby we experience the pleasure of the ascendancy of the supersensible over the sensible and reason over the imagination in the context of, here, a unique piece of music to which we can then turn our critical faculties.

7. Conclusion

While this dissertation has primarily endeavoured to show the fruitfulness of investigating *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Gruppen* and, by extension, a *species* of later modernist art through the lens of the Kantian sublime, it has thus far avoided drawing specific comparisons across media. While many of the commonalities of the works were outlined in the introduction, and many more will be allowed to remain latent, a few are worth highlighting here in a summation of the implications of the model for modernist art in general, and as a way of asking to what extent the concept of the mathematical sublime is a useful or necessary one in this context. As the primary goal of this conclusion will be to provide some sense of generality across art forms as well as across disciplines, the dense critical references of the past chapters will be eschewed in favour of a more general outline of the salient aspects of the relationship between *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Gruppen*, and the Kantian and phenomenological frameworks with which I have engaged them. That being said, it should be kept in mind that a majority of this dissertation has been engaged in what could be called ‘metacritical’ discourse, in that a primary concern has been the current range of critical responses and resources surrounding each work and the implications on the shape of the work itself and further responses to it. The concepts gathered from this metacritical work and its relationship to the concept of a critical model will be addressed in the final section. For now I will turn to the links between these three pieces of art and what general statements can be made about their structure, and how these relate to broader ideas of the relationship between the whole and the parts that have been in the background for much of this dissertation.

Commonalities: Defining Complexity

The question of how the three works being examined, *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible*, and *Gruppen*, relate to each other has many possible answers and, importantly, types of answers. The most obvious and perhaps most important answers relate to the formal and structural similarities between the works. When comparing works across media, formal considerations are often a first, or indeed, only solid ground on which to make claims. At the most basic level, we can talk about the fact that all three works are complex. While there are many ways in which novels, films, and music can be complex, the type of complexity that these works share is of a particular sort. *Finnegans Wake* is not renowned for the emotional depth of its characters, nor, for instance, the type of plot-based complexity to be found in a novel of political intrigue or espionage. These are both valid examples of complexity, but neither lend themselves particularly well to interdisciplinary comparisons. We could argue that music or film are capable of demonstrating emotional complexity, but, in the case of film, this complexity is rarely as internal or immanent to consciousness as is achievable in a novel like, for instance, *Ulysses*; and when we speak of emotional complexity in music we are usually speaking of the *evocation* of emotion in the listener, which is a very different question. These difficulties are avoided by sticking to as formal as possible a definition of complexity, which in this dissertation has been oriented around the idea of the relationship between the size of the parts and the size of the whole. Inspired by the Kantian mathematical sublime, this relationship between the size of the parts and the whole endeavoured to show how each work was remarkable for its deployment of the smallest possible units of meaning in the framework of as large as possible a total work. In *Finnegans Wake*, this meant examining how Joyce's use of a portmanteau-based argot allowed him to create words with many discrete, often multilingual signifiers. In *Ivan the Terrible*, this meant looking at

Eisenstein's polyvalent frames, overloaded with visual cues, layering as many meaningful images into view as possible. With *Gruppen*, this involved Stockhausen's use of an adapted serial composition in order to create an unprecedented folding of the concepts of tempo and tone, which allowed him to create micro-relationships between the smallest perceptible differences in sound. On a formal level, these are the strongest links between the three works, and as such, the Kantian notion of the mathematical sublime, with its focus on the differential between the small and the large in perception, suggested itself as an investigative and comparative tool to look at features of the three works in terms of this complexity. The core idea at work is that the smallest divisible units of meaning establish a base of measurement with which the whole is grasped. What this idea allows for is comparison of size and complexity across media. While it would be conceivable to divide each work into more or less objective units of signification — phonemes, frames (or objects within frame), and tones — comparing these units quickly becomes ridiculous. There is no equation by which we might compare the relative size of units of meaning in two different media as there is no standard measure for the size, or what we could call the 'cardinality' of a unit of meaning. Likewise, even if it were possible to complete a count of these units per work, knowing how many phonemes make up *Finnegans Wake* would be anecdotal at best; notions of the number, or 'ordinality' of the units of meaning contributes nothing to comparative notions of complexity in art. Comparing levels of complexity across media is possible only after a notion of complexity is defined for each work in terms immanent to that work. The Kantian concept or metaphor is helpful here in two ways: first, it suggests that size ("cardinality") and amount ("ordinality") can be related to make up a standard of complexity or generalized size. In our modified version of the mathematical sublime, a work's (in any medium) measure of sublime complexity is related to the differential between the cardinality and

ordinality of the work: the smaller the unit of meaning and the greater the number of these units (the scale on which they are deployed), the more complex the work. This concept is useful on a basic art critical level, as it allows for a work-immanent notion of complexity, but it is more important for interdisciplinary comparisons. *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible*, and *Gruppen* are obviously complex works; few casual mentions or critical studies fail to address this point. They are also all clearly products of the modernist art world. What the particular notion of divisible units of meaning and the differential between cardinality and ordinality introduces is the fact that they are all complex in *very similar ways*, and that this type of complexity is endemic to late modernism.

The second idea suggested by the Kantian concept is that of the *suggestion* of the infinite. No work is infinite in any mathematical sense, but the concept of infinity can be suggested or explored through finite forms. If we think of the Hegelian progression — from the ‘bad’ counting infinity to the ‘good’ infinity of wholeness — in terms of a conceptualization problem, we could consider certain tropes as visual, auditory, or literary aides in making the conceptual transition. This provides another, almost didactic facet to the works, and allows for a discussion of them in terms of their *impact* or reception, not merely for their immanent formal features. While it is clearly facile to suggest that the *point* of *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan* or *Gruppen* is to teach their audiences about the infinite, the idea that something of their structure could convey the infinite through a finite form is important in many ways which have been discussed above and some others which I will briefly touch upon here.

Two of the above statements combine to suggest an important question: if the complexity of these works is endemic to modernism, and this complexity in some ways suggests the infinite through a finite form, how, if at all, do works pre- or post-dating modernism suggest the infinite?

While a full examination of this question is far outside the scope of this dissertation, it is important to note how my thesis makes this question relevant and salient. Given that the infinite has been a feature in art since antiquity, and that the notion of the sublime has been associated with the infinite in *some form* since at least Longinus, it is clear that if one even partially accepts my thesis that complex works of late modernism can be fruitfully examined through the lens of the mathematical sublime, then there could be some version of pre- and post-modernist versions of sublimity which strive to evoke the infinite in potentially interesting and different ways. While, as stated, this is far outside the scope of this dissertation, I will give a very brief synopsis of one way in which this question might be answered in order to highlight how my thesis contributes to other formulations of the question.

To briefly answer the question of “what would a postmodern sublime look like?”, I would start by accepting my primary thesis that the late-modernist sublime evokes the infinite through the finite through the differential between the very small units of expression and the very large scale of the canvas on which these units are deployed. This is essentially the evocation of infinity through the figure of the “so large it cannot be grasped.” This figure conforms to the modernist *idée fixe* of exploration of limits, and to the ambitions of the avant-garde, while remaining in a direct lineage with classical ideas of sublimity as opposed to beauty, as illustrated by the commonplace of the temple versus the cathedral. In opposition to this, the post-modern evocation of the infinite would be through the figure of *recursion* or the *loop*.³⁶ Recursion as suggestive of the infinite occurs in postmodern art under a variety of guises including, but not

³⁶ An obvious rebuttal or caveat to this delineation would be the oft-cited loop of *Finnegans Wake*, but I would argue that this feature, while an obviously integral aspect of the structure of the book, works in a very different way than the post-modern loop of recursion in that its loop is suggestive of continuation and rereading rather than self-reference or recursion.

limited to: the strange loops of self-reference in the story within story (see John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*), the idea of the virtual world-within-world or "brain in a vat" world (see Rainer Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht* (1973), or the recursive infinite of reuse or sampling (explicitly Kirk Pearson's 2009 composition *Going Up* and Christian Marclay's 2010 video installation *The Clock*, both of which involve counting and rely exclusively on repurposed media). While the idea of postmodernism relying on the figure of self-reference is a fairly common one, what it gains in comparison to the idea of the *modernist* sublime proposed in this dissertation is a direct way of comparing ways of expressing infinitude through finitude and the possibility of examining internal, structural, and formal characteristics of art across media, genres, and movements along these particular lines. This is not to say, however, that this model presents a clear delineation between late-modernist and postmodern art, in fact, one of its strengths would theoretically be showing how some of these representative forms *persisted* into postmodern art. I would suggest that a fruitful avenue for further investigation would be the similarities and differences in portraying the infinite between late modernist works and what could be called "entropic fiction" such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or William Gaddis's *JR*. These works obviously contain some of the breadth of reference and superstructure as the works examined here, but lack the attempt at smaller and smaller units of meaning. While there is not space to explore these connections here, I believe the persistence of *some* formal characteristics, such as scope and breadth of reference, and the disappearance of others, such as an interest in the development of innovative micro-forms of meaning, would be very revealing. What is important in this context is not the general idea of a 'late modernist sublime,' but the particular model of minimal units of meaning deployed in a maximal range, and the Kantian suggestion of these smaller units being taken up as a measurement with which to view the whole. Especially in the context of this

model, this avenue of research seems at the very least likely to provide a different and revealing spin on the cliché of postmodern rejection of “meta-narrative.” By providing a philosophical vocabulary for the units of meaning across media, the introduction of this particular idea of the mathematical sublime in late-modernist art opens up some fruitful discussions for lines of continuity and areas of difference between eras in a mode particularly friendly to cross-media comparisons.

Critical Continuities

Another line of analysis opened up by the particularities of this model is that of the critical receptions of these works, which is perhaps the most interesting non-formal link between *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible*, and *Gruppen*. While there are, of course, huge variations in critical approaches to each work (*Finnegans Wake* criticism alone forming an almost total encyclopedia of possible literary approaches), there are also some remarkable consistencies. The most notable consistent or recurring critical trends are, respectively, a reliance on authorial intent and planning and a focus on external signification or reference.

The former quality, the reliance on authorial planning, manifests most obviously in *Wake* criticism, which has been the most fertile ground for the development of what is now known as genetic criticism. As discussed in the Joyce chapter above, this form of criticism examines the drafts and notes for the work in order to create a sort of multi-dimensional portrait of a work in progress, providing glimpses into closed possibilities as well as final decisions. It also relies heavily on biographical knowledge, gleaning insight from epiphenomena such as books Joyce might have read and articles he could have come across. The thread of authorial intent is present in this type of reading to an extent not usually seen in contemporary criticism. While this type of

reliance on biographical information and what amounts to authorial glossing is most evident in Joyce, the fact that it appears in the critical bodies of work surrounding *Gruppen* and *Ivan* as well is highly telling. All three of the major works on *Ivan*, but especially Yuri Tsivian's, rely heavily on Eisenstein's notes and sketches for the film, a critical practice which, while not predominant in literary criticism, is more unusual still in writing on film. Likewise, Stockhausen's articles, notes, and interviews are held in unusually important standing for criticism and explication of *Gruppen*. This critical reliance on authorial intent, notes, and drafts has a few possible explanations, one of which is that all three of these creators were to some extent also theorists of their craft. This certainly holds up with Eisenstein and Stockhausen, although Joyce preferred to let his friends and acolytes do the explaining for him³⁷, but fails to completely account for the emphasis on the *notes* and drafts of the works themselves. A simple explanation for this would be the simple fact that the works are all extremely difficult to penetrate, and one should look for help anywhere that one can, but the structural reading suggested by this dissertation provides a third possibility. The model of the mathematical sublime and its emphasis on the micro- and macro-fronts of meaning suggests a critical analogue of, respectively, *tactical* and *strategic* reliance on authorial information. In terms of the micro-front, the job of the critic is to interpret the individual units of meaning and their place in the slightly larger units of meaning. In the case of Eisenstein, this would involve the deciphering of, for example, the historical or idiosyncratic signification of a mural painted in the background of a scene, and, after that, its relation to the position of the characters, the dialogue, the shadows, the position of the camera, and so on. For Joyce, this decipherment would begin with the individual morphemes of the words, finding their linguistic origins, and proceeding on to the

³⁷ See *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incanmination of Work in Progress*.

word as a whole, the sentence, etc.; for Stockhausen this would begin with one instrument's written notes in terms of tempo and pitch, then the relation between them in the context of the movement, then the other instruments and those relations, etc. The critical reliance here is *tactical* in the sense that it is a moment-by-moment indexical reliance, and not interpretive of the work on the whole. The work at this stage of interpretation is often highly lexical and the author's notes and drafts can act as one dictionary among many. The other type of reference to authorial notes or intent is *strategic* in that it involves a higher order of critical interpretation, usually an attempt to make statements about either the work as a whole, or at least a macro-movement or aspect of the work. Examples of strategic reliance on authorial intent would include statements as to whether or not *Finnegans Wake* comprises a dream³⁸, the extent to which *Ivan* is a comment on Stalinism, and, most remarkably, Overholt's assertion that Stockhausen cryptographically signed his name to *Gruppen*. The tactical/strategic dichotomy is useful here not only in the sense that it separates micro from macro intent in critical practice, but also as it implies that in good critical practice, good strategy is based on good tactics. A brief section below will explain one critical example of good tactical/strategic relationship for each of the works with the aim of demonstrating the continuity between critical approaches to these works, but it will be helpful to first examine the second, closely related characteristic mentioned above: the reliance on external reference.

More than most other texts, *Finnegans Wake* is almost unreadable in a vacuum. It is, in practice, often first read with at least one guidebook, reference guide, or annotative volume open alongside it. Its most elucidative and fascinating body of secondary works, genetic criticism, is devoted to expanding what is considered the text to all of the notes, drafts, and research Joyce

³⁸ See especially John Bishop's reliance on Joyce's letters in his *Book of the Dark*.

undertook while writing the book. *Ivan the Terrible* is, of course, watchable to neophytes of film history, art history, or Russian history, but much is lost without some sense of Eisenstein's myriad references. *Gruppen*, likewise, does not demand a familiarity with serialism, but the piece is radically different when listened to as a response to that movement. It is, of course, possible to attempt to look at any work of art in a vacuum, performing a sort of phenomenological/critical reduction to limit the perspective brings to it, as it is likewise possible to look at a work of art purely in terms of its cultural/artistic context, but most readings vacillate between these two extremes, and readings of these works in particular emphasize the difference between the types of possible approaches due to the complexity and density of reference of their content.

While this relationship between the primary 'text' and its explications is explored in each work's respective chapter above, it will be instructive to briefly consider some of the *mereological* considerations here. Merology, the study of the relationship between the whole and its parts, doesn't seem immediately relevant to the question of a work and its external reference until one considers that the question of approaching the work often amounts to a decision about the *priority* of the work or its references. In the context of artistic works, this amounts to a question of critical approach: should one treat the works as monolithic wholes or intertextual surfaces? While this differential is present, latently, in any work, it is made explicitly manifest in any discussion the works at hand because of their aforementioned difficulty and the helpfulness of prior knowledge of the creative milieu of their formation. Many of the commonalities between the critical approaches to *Finnegans Wake*, *Ivan the Terrible*, and *Gruppen* come down to the ever-present choice between a pluralist or monist approach to the works. A best practices approach to their complexity is often in the spirit of openness and reference, but this doesn't

necessarily imply the priority of the parts over the whole. In fact, I would argue that the best critical approaches are squarely located in the monist camp, and that their explications and readings are all based on the precedence of the whole. In order to address this question properly, it will be necessary to first introduce the idea of tactical vs. strategic elements of a critical reading before returning to the question of the pluralist/monist readings of the works. As most of this paper has been concerned with the difference between the micro-level and macro-level readings of modernist works, this will serve as a final examination of the implications of this important concept.

Tactics/Strategy

For the purpose of this short section, we can consider a critical approach to be ‘strategically sound’ if it leverages its tactical or micro-level analysis towards its broader macro-level summations of thesis. John Bishop’s *Book of the Dark* is strategically sound because it leverages tactical examinations of lexical origins derived from Joyce’s notes, dictionaries, and other sources to put forth a strategic thesis that is linked to each of these tactical ‘moves.’ Bishop’s broad strategy is to prove that the text of *Finnegans Wake* and therefore its style is the product of a dream consciousness. His primary critical tactic in achieving this strategy is the ‘seeding’ or interlacing of many of his own sentences with quotations, often single words, of the *Wake* — emphasizing the micro-aspects of the book while discussing the macro. This tactical/strategic pairing could, of course, be used in the investigation of books very unlike *Finnegans Wake* and therefore far outside the purview of this dissertation and the concept of the modernist sublime. Bishop’s particularly emphasizes the smallest units of meaning, however, in service of an extremely broad thesis about the ‘meaning’ writ large of *Finnegans Wake*, emphasizing the

uniqueness of this type of critical strategy and the necessity of an unusually large gap between tactical and strategic goals. One could examine etymological origins in *any* work of literature, but it is doubtful whether it would serve any broad interpretive goal in this manner.

Another critical example of tactical/strategic interdependency would be Yuri Tsivian's concept of the 'twin *Ivans*,' the two versions of *Ivan the Terrible*: one extant, one *which Tsivian imagines* in Eisenstein's mind, and that he refers to throughout his book on the film. This critical tactic — the constant reference not only to Eisenstein's notes and drafts for *Ivan*, but what he would have seen in the film given what we know of him — form the basis for Tsivian's conclusions as the meaning and *intended impact* of the film. This tactic is much more biographically reliant than Bishop's, but still engages with micro-level aspects of the film, notably the significance of the placement of a foot (Tsivian, 33–34), in order to advance a very macro-level idea. What is key is that the micro-level tactic, that of biographically-aided glosses on the film, is completely in line with the macro-level thesis: that Eisenstein meant for the film to specifically evoke emotion in a near-Pavlovian manner through the use of culturally evocative images. Tsivian's use of a micro-level (tactical) analysis of Eisenstein's personal intentions and reading of the most minute details enable him to suggest a very broad (strategic-level) meaning for the intentions of the filmmaker in general.

In a final example of tactical/strategic harmony, there is the example of Sarah Overholt's development of a symbolic language for the sound shapes in Stockhausen's *Gruppen* as a tactic for the presentation of a strategic-level thesis of the importance of three-dimensional sound in the work in general. Here, Overholt's micro-level tactic is very interesting because it explicitly addresses the *limits* of apprehension of *Gruppen*, and explicitly acknowledges the impossibility of a listening approach that could encompass all of the micro- and macro-level details and form.

Instead her thesis revolves around crafting a reductive language for describing micro-level sound-events on the basis of (mostly) *shape* alone, and then leveraging this into a description of the whole intelligible enough to draw conclusions from.

Beyond the idea of leveraging a micro-level tactic to accomplish a simpatico macro-level strategy, these critical approaches also share a trait briefly explored at the end of the Stockhausen chapter above: in the context of this dissertation's exploration of responses to the overwhelming complexity of modernist works, these critical strategies could be considered as attempts to convey sublime understanding. The core of the Kantian mathematical sublime involves achieving understanding through a response to the overwhelming of the senses. In some ways, this experience must be deeply personal, as illustrated by the wonderful story Yuri Tsivian shares of watching *Ivan the Terrible* in the theatre with his grandmother. Any attempt to *convey* this sublime understanding would seem quixotic, except in that they *repeat* or *reproduce* the experience on some level. It is, of course, impossible to replicate a moment of realization, but what makes these critical examples strategically sound is not merely a relationship between the tactical and the strategic, but that fact that this micro/macro differential is a (conscious or not) attempt to *replicate* the movement from the very small to the unimaginably large that represents the experience of sublimity evoked by the works themselves.

The relevant concepts here are the ascension from the 'bad' infinite to the 'good' in Hegel, and the Kantian sense by which an overwhelming of the senses can be accompanied by a rational insight into the purpose and form of an object of nature, or here, an artistic work, despite an inability to grasp or apprehend it in its totality. The suggestion that critics of these works are attempting to express this movement or insight in terms that replicate the effects the work has had on them, we are excavating a truth about the way in which we receive artworks: the pure

subjectivity of the experience, and the necessity to somehow reproduce this subjectivity when explaining it to others. A strategically sound critical approach need not recapitulate the structure of the work of course, but merely reinforce its broader goals through tactical lines, but in the special case of these very complex works, the ‘formlessness’ or ungraspability of the works comes into play. The strategies exemplified by the critical examples above are reactions to the impossibility of explaining works whose very essence is the impossibility of their being explained. The solution to this aporia is to reproduce the conditions of one’s understanding of the work, rather than attempt rational, non-artistic explanation. In other words, a critic apprehends, and studies a work of art exemplifying complexity, and whose whole seems ungraspable. The critic, through the experience of being overwhelmed by the work, comes to an understanding of it. This critic then attempts to explain the work, but, as the understanding imparted to them originated in the structure of the work and in its inaccessibility to rational understanding, the critic, consciously or not, recapitulates the structure of the work in their work, thus attempting to recreate the conditions of their own understanding, or at least *prime the reader* to understand the work themselves.

While this hypothesis goes a long way towards explaining the reception of these works, it is, alone, essentially un-falsifiable, and lives mainly in the realm of poetic speculation. What it provides, however, is a lens or model with which to view the critical bodies of work which surround the artworks at hand, as well as a guiding set of concepts for formulating meta-critical questions such as those posed in the introduction to this dissertation. The final section of this conclusion will address some of the theoretical grounding for this concept of model and its meta-critical ramifications, and as such provide a sort of retrospective methodology for this dissertation.

Final Remarks: On a Concept of Model

Yves-Alain Bois's *Painting as Model*, published in 1990, served as one sign among many of the 'theory exhaustion' endemic to the art-critical field in the recent fin-du-siècle period. The introduction to Bois's *Painting as Model* was an attempt to provide both an etiology of this situation and suggest possible rehabilitative actions, most constructed in direct opposition to what he saw as the intellectually deleterious effects of "theoreticism" in the humanities. Several methodological and theoretical decisions emerging from and structuring this paper are related to the questions and suggestions Bois outlines in this introduction, and his use of paintings as *models* for thought has a particular relevance to the research I have undertaken. As Giorgio Agamben points out in the preface to his *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, "contrary to common opinion, a reflection on method usually follows practical application, rather than preceding it. It is a matter, then, of ultimate or penultimate thoughts [...] which can legitimately be articulated only after extensive research" (7). It is for this reason that I have chosen to locate some key methodological concepts here at the end of my dissertation rather than at the beginning. That these definitions are located here is a result of their being determined by the research preceding it, even if they may appear to work as predicates of it. This very formula is itself a product of the concept of 'model' that I will attempt to define here, using Bois's introduction as a framework.

"Theoreticism," in Bois's conception, exists as a sort of blackmail within the art-critical academic community. He names it as "one of the most powerful pressures at work today, one from which liberation is most wanted," describing how it "functions as a superego, encapsulating, fueling, and, alas, discouraging the student's endeavor" (xii). He goes on to clarify that it is not theory *per se* that he finds oppressive, but "the indiscriminate appeal to theory as a

set of ready-made tools to handle a question, as the miracle-solution, no matter the problem” (xii). One of the elements of this approach to theory he finds most troubling is the treatment of “highly complex and often antagonistic works” as part of a “homogenous corpus or fixed system,” another being the “purely instrumental” relationship between theory and theoreticism. Bois then goes on to define a second type of blackmail “exactly symmetrical to the first” which he calls “antitheory,” emergent in the face of theoretical exhaustion, which he describes as follows:

Theoreticism, or theoretical abuse, is based on the illusion that one could ingest swiftly, without previous homework, a mass of difficult and often contradictory texts. Without the background that would permit this material to be mastered usefully, the theoreticist first gives in to “theory” as if it were a new faith; then, more or less rapidly, grows disenchanted because “theory” did not perform immediately the expected miracles. Illusion leads to disillusionment, disillusion to resentment, and resentment to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. (xiii)

After describing this state of affairs, which I would suggest no art-critical student of the last twenty years could find totally foreign, Bois goes on to discuss some of the related forms of blackmail emergent from theoreticism, the first being “fashion.” The pressures of fashion are often in violation of C.S. Lewis’s “chronological fallacy” wherein an idea is falsely considered wrong solely based on its historical providence, specifically its antedating of a competing idea. Bois’s description of fashion is based on this fallacy, from which he elaborates three implications of its occurrence in the art-critical world:

First, ideas are like commodities: they get used, abused, and worn out. Time to take on a new look. Second, the result of research is to be disconnected from its method (if, for one reason or another, the method is suddenly declared “old hat,” either the result has to be discarded as pure fantasy, or the work has to be reframed entirely according to the “new” method). Third, there is only one method available at any one time in any given field. (xiii-xiv)

For Bois the problem with these assumptions is that they lead to a refusal to “consider [...] the heuristic function of the theoretical model; for it sees it as mere wrapping” (xiv). This statement

is an incredibly important corollary to the problem of theoreticism in general, and introduces the term “model” to this discussion, a term important enough to spend some time here on a digression into its definition, and some related questions of method.

Like “idea,” “concept,” or “set,” the term “model” is one of those nearly axiomatic terms the active definition of which often relies on its deployment within an already established field of language until enough relational meanings have accrued to give shape to its meaning. This method works suitably, for example, in the case of the term “set” within the domain of mathematics, but this success is attributable to its *novelty* within this context and the general lack of presuppositions already surrounding the term for a subject first encountering it³⁹. For a term like “model” with one or more established vernacular definitions, this method suffers from the excess of sedimentary meaning already compacted around the word and its usage. This problem suggests the need for a method whereby one could partially circumvent some of the extant meanings attached to a term, allowing one to attach new meanings and questions to its signifying power without entirely losing the rich denotative and connotative accretions of meaning drawing us to its use in the first place (value lost in, for instance, the method of neologism). One method of circumvention would be the Husserlian concept of the zig-zag (*Zick-Zack*), a “sort of vicious

³⁹ Many mathematical textbooks remark upon this problem of introducing terms, particularly that of “set” which is never defined. See, for example John B. Fraleigh’s *A First Course in Abstract Algebra* where he remarks, apropos of the difficulty of defining term in mathematics, that “our language is finite, so after some time we will run out of new words to use and have to repeat some words [we have used to define the primary term]. The definition is then circular and obviously worthless. Mathematicians realize that there must be some undefined or primitive concept. At the moment they have agreed that *set* shall be such a primitive concept. We shall not define *set*, but we shall hope that when such expressions as ‘the set of all real numbers,’ or ‘the set of all members of the United States Senate’ are used, peoples various ideas of what is meant are sufficiently similar to make communication feasible” (2).

circle” (*The Crisis*, 263) where one attempts to move

back and forth between "exemplary individual intuitions of experiences" and the intersubjective process of employing insights based in these subjective intuitions as data in an intersubjective "descriptive fixation of the contemplated essences into pure concepts," through a "systematic clarification" that "removes conceptual obscurities," a process of clarification that "must...make use of all the concepts we are trying to clarify." (Reeder, 18)

Put in more casual terms, the zig-zag is an attempt at a workable solution to the impasse of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, whereby a text is only comprehensible to one whose thoughts have followed the same paths: rather than submit to this quandary, Husserl suggests that we instead approach the learning subject by saying "Here is a description of some intuitions I have had of late, and the method whereby I arrived at them. You will notice that some of these terms are either unfamiliar or else being used in unfamiliar ways. Please do not be discouraged; rather, trust me and the direction I will take you, and I promise, in the end, these terms will have clarified themselves." An appeal, in other words, to the triumph of the economic over the aneconomic in language.

'Model,' as a recurrent term for this paper, has come to stand for the formal conceptual apparatus resulting from the deployment of a philosophical concept for art-critical purposes in a manner allowing for a reflexive relationship between two or more worlds of discourse. This definition is somewhat based on Bois's concept of model, but it was not axiomatic for the formation of this paper. It emerged, as Agamben suggests most methodologies do, organically from the process of research and writing. Appropriately, Bois's use of the term 'model' is never explicitly defined, but conceptually developed in the course of his introduction and the essays that serve as examples of its usage. While discussing 'fashion' as a form of blackmail, he uses the example of Thomas Pavel's critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss's reliance on Saussurean structural linguistics as 'passé,' a criticism which Pavel amusingly follows up with statements

aligning himself with Descartes as an alternative. Bois rightly points out the anachronism of this critique before moving to his main, model-based criticism, observing that “Levi Strauss did not adopt this model because it was the latest trend, for it did not exist as a model yet. He founded it as a model because it was for him the best way to organize the immense amount of raw material that lay in front of him” (xiv). There are two important ideas here: first, that a model is used because it fits the material at hand, and second, that models are only models as such in retrospect, when they can be judged as the appropriate theoretical tools for having analyzed a set of materials. The model is the theory that worked.

Alain Badiou, another *soixante-huitard*, although perhaps a more faithful one than Bois, developed a similar concept of model in the course of a series of lectures given immediately in the wake of the events of '68, published as his first philosophical text, *The Concept of Model*. In the course of this short but very dense exposition, Badiou attempts to found a genuinely materialistic philosophy of science, the foundational principles of which involve his delineation of ideology and the role of mathematics in relation to the hard sciences. One of the most important points made in the course of this attempt is that mathematics is not a means that enables the scientific work done by physics or biology or chemistry, but is a primary productive practice itself; not a purely formal *a priori* science giving the other sciences access to empirical reality, but the type of productive activity that is part of the reality itself. This is important for several reasons, not the least of which is its role in Badiou's dismantling the traditional distinctions between form and content, distinctions that occur in many discourses, including the art-critical.

Labeling this “false duality” between form and content as an *ideological* rather than scientific notion leads him to, in turn, establish three levels of discourse: Philosophical

categories, ideological *notions*, and scientific *concepts*. Opposed to the ideological *notion* of differentiation between a mathematical form and the empirical content of which it is independent, he suggests a scientific *concept* of mathematical formalism called a *model* that is retrospectively assigned to the formal theories that allow a science to advance experimentally. It is only in the meta-level of the philosophy of mathematics or the philosophy of science, that is, the *categorical* levels, in which the role of ideological *notions* or scientific *concepts* matter. The actual practice of mathematical discovery relies on the underlying formalism because it needs to, and it is only from a meta-level that one is able to retrospectively isolate this formalism as a model proper. Likewise, what defines the ideological view here is not any specific version of empiricism and formalism as such, but the *notional* differentiation and correlation that Badiou labels "bourgeois epistemology" (*Concept of Model*, 5).

A related way of thinking about the concept of model would be the Deleuzian differentiation between concepts and functions. For Deleuze and Guattari, the creation of concepts is the providence of philosophy and these concepts exist as intensities inscribed on a plane of immanence. Functions, on the other hand, are the product of the domain of science and are inscribed on the plane of reference. To understand the differences between how these domains function, we could think of the example of Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. This singular book proposed a scientific model, meant to serve a functional purpose in the world of science, to fit into the development of that domain's progressively more complete analysis of the world. With regards to its success, Richard Dawkins wrote that "It is one of those books that is either complete rubbish or a work of consummate genius, nothing inbetween! Probably the former, but I'm hedging my bets" (*The God Delusion*, 392). The efficacy of bicameralism as a metaphor for cognitive evolution is obviously outside the

scope of this paper, but the “nothing inbetween” of Dawkin’s response is illuminating. In the domain of philosophy a concept does not exist as an either/or. Even a “disproven” concept maintains value in so far as it represents a novel or potentially illustrative point, a “reusable” set of abstract relations, a particular methodology applicable to a new subject etc. In other words, a philosophical concept may have value outside of its specific usage and far past its “expiration date,” as Bois highlights with his attention to the fallacy of “fashion.”

Deleuze, like Badiou, is also very careful to delineate the role of philosophy *in relation* to science, making it clear that although there can be concepts of functions (a philosophical commentary on a scientific principle, for example), philosophy does not *create* functions on a plane of reference and therefore science does not need to “care” about philosophy. An illustration of this would be the importance of distinguishing between Deleuze and Guattari’s *concept* of schizophrenia versus a *functional* scientific analysis of the disease. The concept of schizophrenia in *Anti Oedipus* and *Thousand Plateaus* does occasionally point towards the plane of reference—to scientific functions—but it only does so in the service of creating concepts. These concepts are deployable in other contexts with other examples; they are transferable and their usefulness does not need to appeal to the plane of reference. We can think of Badiou’s models of relation in much the same way. He does not determine their genetic origins or their planes of deployment in quite the same way, but he provides a similar analysis of the ways in which levels of discourse relate to each other and the forms of analysis proper to each level. This is consistent with Bois’s reading of how theory refers to its grounding or foundational discourses, and leads us to another point of intersection for Bois and Badiou: formalism.

The great sins of theoreticism according to Bois are its appeals to fashion, its treatment of philosophy as a set of ‘ready-made’ concepts, and an aspect we have not as yet discussed, its

antiformalism. The sin of antiformalism relates directly to Badiou's concept of model and the reciprocal relationship between a theory and its ground. The primary point, after all, of his *Concept of Model* is that the distinction (pertaining to mathematics' relation to the sciences) between form and content is in fact an ideological notion, a point nearly mirrored by Bois in his defense of formalism. For Bois, antiformalism is comprised of two main attacks, one being on the critic's right to "store up" and on "the possibility of retaining parts of a system while not swallowing it whole," in other words, on the method of theory based criticism in general (Bois, xiv). The second attack is more pervasive, and manifests as an identification of "formalism" as an interpretive or creative framework inherently opposed to "content"-based readings of or productions of meaning. Bois frames this attack around historical instances of the political versus the formal, citing Eisenstein's defense of his (and other members of the Russian avant-garde's) so-called formalist tendencies. Bois shows how "Eisenstein's argument [...] is that 'form is *always ideological*", and that [...] presupposing that any form could be ideologically "empty", deprived of content, is either entirely naïve or entirely dishonest – depending on the level at which "form" is taken into consideration" (xxi). Like Badiou, Eisenstein and Bois are arguing that the entire opposition between form and content is predicated on false assumptions about form's 'emptiness' or lack of productive potential. In Badiou's example this manifests in the view of mathematics as not a productive science but merely as the formal grounds for scientific productivity, mathematics being the 'empty' form, and 'productive' science the content. Partly in order to explain the *productive* role of mathematics and partly in service of a general critique of the bourgeois conception of form vs. content, Badiou advances a concept of the relation between the two based on the logical discipline of model theory. While the logical/mathematical aspects of Badiou's paper are outside the scope of this discussion, his emphasis on the *productive* role of

mathematics, and its ability to create content and not merely formal grounds with which the sciences might produce content is instructive for our purposes.

While Bois rightly points out the negative effects of “theoreticism” and its associated forms of intellectual blackmail, what Badiou’s position suggests is a *reciprocally deleterious* effect on the philosophical text or program that “theory” uses as a ground. Restricting ourselves to philosophy as a “ground” or foundations for theory, as it has served in this paper, we can say that theoreticism’s deleterious effect on philosophy comes from the treatment of its grounds as monolithic wholes existing only as static formal resources. The problematic tactic of “appeal to authority” so deplored of continental philosophy by its analytic critics can be understood as symptomatic of this type of reciprocally damaging relationship. An appeal to a philosophical notion as a proof that a reading is correct not only damages the reading, but it damages the philosophical concept by decontextualizing it *and* by treating it as a truth regardless of context. The repeated use of this tactic creates the illusion of stability and immutability in the foundational text. The more these references accrue, the more immutable the text’s “usability” and the more monolithic the philosophical concept. Avoiding this effect does not require either an abandonment of philosophical references in art-critical writing, nor does it require that each art critic become a philosopher or student of philosophy. What it requires is the *flexible* and active deployment of philosophy within other genres of writing. In this context we can define a “model” as the deployment of a philosophical concept in conjunction with an artistic object in a manner flexible enough to allow each to alter the others meaning. This type of model making, however, is never as simple as that definition would suggest. The activity undertaken in the service of constructing a theory to explain a piece of art often involves the consecutive construction and abandonment of several such models. The presence of an artwork brings to

mind a particular set of philosophical concepts which in turn illuminate some aspect of the work, or the inverse, a particular philosophical concepts seems to demand a particular example from the world of art to clarify it, and in so clarifying, illuminates the work in turn. In art-critical or theoretical practice we will often attempt to express, either in writing or in a lecture, this relationship. Sometimes it is successful, sometimes not. Often times many attempts will be made to find a ‘way in’ to the work, or to the philosophical concept. The work resists interpretation. The final model is only evident in retrospect, after the right concepts have emerged in the right context. By treating the philosophical aspects of this process as productive elements in their own right, rather than merely formal grounds from which to build arguments, we can avoid the deleterious effect of treating philosophical concepts as monolithic.

Despite appearances, this approach need not rely on a completely Deleuzian position wherein the major productive work of philosophy is the creation concepts. As illustrated by much of this paper, *perspective*, phenomenological or otherwise, is also a primary product of philosophy that can be re-deployed within an art-critical perspective, as can formal semantic analysis. A number of models incorporating philosophical concepts and artistic forms have been developed or suggested in this paper, and it is these models, whether based in Kantian critique, phenomenology, or the critical apparatus surrounding the study of literature, film, or music, that are often the greater “product” than the content of the analyses themselves. Hopefully, this paper has contributed to the ongoing production of usable concepts, as well as illuminating the works at hand.

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