

THE SUBLIME VOID SUITE: PHASE 1 OF A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF SUBLIME MARITIME ART IN SLOW FILMS

Shaun Wilson, RMIT University



Video still, *Sublime Void 2025*, UHD, sound, 8:34 mins.

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STATEMENT

The *Sublime Void Suite* (2025-) is a long term, practice-based moving image study that explores the tensions of sublimity in maritime art. It is structured across nine interlinked phases, with the numeric use of nine corresponding to maritime folklore, whereby the ‘ninth wave’ is universally considered to be the most destructive and monstrous in a sequence of waves. The research examines key sets of scholarship across maritime art history, philosophical debates on the sublime, and moving image practice to ground a response framed through contemporary metamodernism. In asking how the Kantian definition of the sublime can be situated in video art, Phase 1 asked what mechanisms can be developed as a

visual device to test Kant's sublime within moving image practice that will lead to further developmental work when exploring in Phase 2. In completing this evaluation, a total of nine works were produced as three sets of single, dual, and three channel videos. The methodology deployed was phenomenologically oriented, specifically developed as a means to prioritise the role of affectual experience in so far as the end result would determine the nature and scope of future research phases to come.

BACKGROUND

In relation to the sublime, maritime landscape art sustains a distinct and enduring tradition that differentiates it from other horizon-based landform art genres. This distinction concerns a specific configuration of affect wherein the sea operates in duality – a device later used in the work for context – as, on the one hand, a perceptual limit and, on the other, an existential threshold of sublimity. This distinction is grounded among primary factors. First, the maritime is historically bound to a mythology of the sea populated by monstrous figures such as giant whales (Turner), krakens (Gibson) and serpents (Doré); enchanted beings including sirens (Waterhouse), nymphs (Draper), and sea horses; and deities such as Neptune (Dyce), Poseidon (Bunny), and Amphitrite (Giani). Second, the sea is persistently associated with danger and death, whether through deception (Leighton), psychological despair (Géricault), or divine wrath (Brebietta), as well as through the ever-present threat of drowning and the overwhelming forces of natural systems (Aivazovsky). In contrast, land-based forms rarely produce the same immediacy of existential threat. The maritime, in this sense, presents an aesthetic shared between the oscillation of beauty and horror.

In much of the writing of Burke and Kant, for example, the sublime informs an oddity amongst maritime landscape art synonymous with the foundations of two key points. For Burke, it was terror and awe as found in the threat of sea forces overcoming human voyages, and for Kant, it was that reason triumphs when nature overwhelms the imagination. In Burkean terms, the sea intensifies affect, positioning maritime space as a site where human vulnerability is foregrounded against elemental force. In both contexts, the considerations occur with two opposite values contrasted next to each other in the same sense that metamodernism oscillates between two contrasted values to determine an affectual structure. In Kantian terms, this confrontation is ultimately resolved through the assertion of rational faculty over sensory overload, producing a reflective sublime as opposed to a purely affective sublime. In this way, sublimity in both Burkean and Kantian perspectives is compatible with the theoretical way in which metamodernism determines, ontologically, 'being among' (Vermeulen, van den Akker 2017) and epistemologically, 'between' (Gibbons 2017). The tensions within maritime art reflect an unstable negotiation of affect and meaning in aesthetic experiences. Taken together, these positions allow the maritime sublime to be reframed as a structured oscillation inclusive among and between (Gibbons 2017) each other.

When examining the history of maritime imagery across Western art, a recurring tension emerges between history and mythology in a contemporary setting. Across successive centuries, representations of the sea repeatedly fall into two dominant traditions in maritime painting. The first consists of documentary images that include depictions of battles such as Aivazovsky's *Battle of Navarino* (1827), weather such as Turner's *The Wreck of a Transport Ship* (1810) the picturesque such as Jan van de Cappelle's *Seascape with Ships* (1660), and vessels such as Pieter Mulier the Elder's *Choppy Sea* (1640) linked to specific historical events and narrative accounts of everyday life. The other involves mythological and fictional sea narratives, including takes on monsters, creatures, and deities. A common feature, then, of European traditions of maritime art is the inclusion of giant sea creatures, including whales such as Taverner's *Jonah and the Whale (after Dughet)* (1745-1772), squids such as the R.Rathbun's engraving *The Giant Squid* (1881), and octopuses such as the J.Gibson's *The Kraken, as Seen by the Eye of the Imagination* (1887) that similarly evoke figures of gods of the sea, namely Poseidon and Neptune, embodying tranquillity and wrath within the pictorial frame. In addition, mermaids such as H. Pyle's *The Mermaid* (1910) appear as a recurring thematic motif of tranquillity and intimacy as the fifty daughters of Nereus who offered sailors protection as opposed to sirens, as depicted in Draper's *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1909) who lured sailors to their deaths as an embodiment of desire and temptation within mythological frameworks. According to a metamodern perspective based on Vermeulen and van den Akker's approach (2010, 2017), these motifs arguably register a shared maritime imaginary in which narrative history interpenetrates mythological excess over the otherwise picturesque confinement of 16th-19th- century maritime art.

Despite the persistence of these traditions, a challenge for contemporary readings of maritime art is that these images are deeply embedded in historical systems of belief and symbolism that are arguably no longer culturally operative in the same way. As a result, interpreting contemporary maritime art requires a critical reassessment of how these inherited visual languages continue to shape meaning in the present beyond aesthetic appeal, which I have done in the Phase 1 videos. Insofar, then, as a contemporary context is concerned, maritime art over the last decade has increasingly been engaged with debates surrounding the climate crisis (Stafford 2025), particularly through ecological (Tribot 2021) and socio-political issues centred on migration (Torp-Pedersen 2025), and refugees (Salemink 2024). In this context, the sea is refigured as geopolitical *and* ecological, dispersed against material allegories beyond a manifest of the picturesque and hence, distributed into a global system. Whilst Romanticist images of the sea still exist on social media and in artist communities, especially within the provocations of AI imagery, the context of such for the academy's concern has also shifted to host serious debates about maritime art as an entirety through the work of decolonisation (Abulaf 2024) in maritime art museums.

This institutional turn further complicates maritime visibility by repositioning it within debates over historical narrative authority from a cultural memory perspective of representational ethics. The outcomes of such position maritime art into a compromised

classification. Historical imagery of ocean battles and seafarers is now linked to aspects of colonisation, slavery, monarchist empires, human trafficking, and instruments of genocide. What was once viewed in galleries and museums as an immersive depiction of modernity and Romanticist voyages is now reconsidered as often deeply problematic, if not actuated by tension. In this context, the videos produced for Phase 1 embody an awareness of such matters to play on how these tensions can be intently explored with the presence of active sublimity. As much of these background considerations have contextualised a deeply problematic genre of art history for decolonising processes to reassess, the body of knowledge I have developed in response through my practice has embodied the role of tension as a primary indicator of how the sublime can be used as a device for affectual tension. This leads to future research that aims to better understand how and why the sublime is a significant affectual indicator of socio-political allegory in contemporary maritime art.

THE FILMS

The individual films from Phase 1 are:

The Sublime Void [video recording], UHD, sound, 8:42 mins

Sublime Light [video recording], UHD, sound, 10:00 mins

The Mast of Ariel [video recording], UHD, sound, 10:00 mins

Ghost Ship [video recording], UHD, sound, 15:00 mins

The Shipwreck [video recording], UHD, sound, 15:00 mins

The Ninth Wave [video recording], UHD, sound, 10:00 mins

Shaun Wilson Tied to a Mast During a Storm [video recording], UHD, sound, 8:42 mins

The Raft of Géricault [video recording], UHD, sound, 10:00 mins

Die Lebensstufen [video recording], UHD, sound, 15:00 mins

PEER REVIEW 1

The Sublime Void Suite is an ambitious project of nine multi-channel videos with a stated further series of installments to come. However, for the context of this review, I will only be responding to the videos from Phase 1 as standalone artefacts relative to the research statement. The folio of work itself is impressive in terms of its theoretical depth and scope. There are easily identifiable linkages between all of the works that act as a unified collection of moving image research, yet at the same time remain unique in their own right to be individual critical installments. I was particularly drawn to the way that the horizon line is

integrated as an immersive residue placed as a central part in the way that the author intently combines the sublime within video practice.

Whether this is an intentional part of the project or not, the flipping of the horizon line where the sky becomes sea and vice versa adds a notable tension which optically made me quite unsettled in the watching stage. This is perhaps one of the most successful parts of experimenting with optical effects whilst attentive to 'showing' a subliminal context about maritime art.

As a way of critical dialogue, I would point out that although these are the prototypes of the suite that will undoubtedly be further developed as iterative stages to come, I felt that *The Mast of Ariel* and *The Shipwreck* were underdeveloped in contrast to watching other works that were otherwise resolved, polished, and accomplished in their own right. There are two problems with these works. The first of which is that *The Shipwreck* is too literal to sustain a sublime context. We know by the title what will occur in the overall presence of the subject. It thus becomes a little too obvious - there will be a shipwreck and that is the primary nature of the video. Yet if referring to Kant and Burke with an attention about the sublime, both of their treatises set out a comparison, or what metamodernism talks about as an 'oscillation', between two opposite components coexisting together. I did not gain a sense of oscillation in both of these videos. I would recommend that there is not enough contrast available for the viewer to come to terms with the sublime or metamodernism.

On a different note, I found *Sublime Void* to be the strongest and most haunting of the suit, as to me, the simplicity and subtle use of negative space is deployed with elegance. The contextualisation about the sublime is easy to follow and detailed enough to become affected by the flipping of the horizon line and the meditative state that the slow cinema aspects create within the work.

The research statement needs attention in the second paragraph. There is a distinct shift between discussion about the work and contextualising it against historical aspects. What I would recommend is to divide the statement into two parts - a statement about the videos and an explanatory background about what they mean. If these were separated, then the heavy lifting of the context versus history can be more formally organised. There are also two typos in the last paragraph - 'indicator' not 'indecator' and 'problematic' not 'pproblematic'.

On the whole, I find the entire series a worthwhile and informative moving image project and look forward to future iterations as they progress over the months and years ahead.

PEER REVIEW 2

The video art project 'The Sublime Void' is a solid practice-based contribution to contemporary art. It was a bold attempt at creating a long-term research project about maritime art and the sublime. Even the project's architecture was ambitious in itself.

General comments

- A conceptually strong, long-term project.
- A flexible hierarchy of phases that (I assume) will be a staged roll-out of phases responding to previous iterative outcomes.
- A philosophically dense project (that I found refreshing to experience).
- Socially relevant and taxonomical in its hierarchy of phases.
- Politically engaging.
- A good interpretation of Kant and Burke's ideas on the sublime manoeuvred into contemporary moving image practice.
- A meaningful contribution to contemporary art.
- A good justification for the use of 'nine' based on maritime folklore in the expanded blueprint of the relative series of video art (instead of using a random number that has no relevance to what the work is trying to negotiate).
- High-quality moving image practice.
- A refreshing example of maritime art that acknowledges the fallibility of the subject and conceptual tensions, and not just glorifying them as a positivist manifesto.

Suggestions for the contextual statement

- In paragraph one, the researcher discusses the nature of the work but fails to mention how the affectual mechanisms will function - is it ontological, phenomenological, or epistemological? It's written in such a way that without a clear definition or any prescribed definition leaves out a key aspect of the work that otherwise would help a viewer ascertain what the project is about.
- Combine paragraphs discussing the mermaid and squid artworks as they are the same discussion. Avoid splitting paragraphs apart because as they are, you're treating each text body as a separate instance when they are of the same discussion point.
- I am most certain that the 'Eraper' reference is actually the artist 'Draper' - need to check this.
- The last paragraph is too complex and left me confused. Please simplify it and also mention that the aspect of the problematic nature of historical maritime art must be acknowledged from a decolonial perspective (and without it, you are glossing over the fact).

Suggestions for the video art

- There is a constant green line on the left-hand side of 'The Shipwreck' that seems to be an encoding issue, please re-encode and avoid using an Mp4, try a mov H264 or Apple ProRes instead.
- Sound levels in 'The Sublime Void', 'The Mast of Ariel', and 'Ghost Barge' require mixing down as their existing levels are too loud.

- The ‘Ghost Barge’ video could be retitled to ‘Ghost Ship’ as this ties in with ‘The Flying Dutchman’ style of maritime painting as a ghost ship (see the painting by Charles Temple Dix for reference).
- The ‘Sublime Light’ dual-channel video seems underweighted. Would you consider refilming or re-editing to make it into a three channel instead?
- Add in additional streaks (I am presuming you used the same ones in ‘Sublime Void’) to ‘The Mast of Ariel’ as it needs a more intensive overlay to work in the same way as the other works do with the same affect of animated streaks.

RESPONSE STATEMENT

In responding to both reviewers’ comments, I agree with and have actioned all of their feedback into the contextual statement and a re-editing of the work. All grammatical and spelling errors have been resolved, the contextual statement has combined the two separate paragraphs listing types of traditional maritime artwork, context suggestions have been made without challenge, and I have changed the title of *Ghost Barge* as suggested to ‘The Ghost Ship’. I note that the videos have been tweaked, particularly in response to the suggestion of adding a third channel to *Sublime Light* which now reads much stronger. Sound levels have been remixed, additional animated light streaks have been overlaid in all works, and encoding issues are now resolved. All of these changes are now updated and reflected in the amended contextual statement. Thank you to both reviewers for a thoughtful and meaningful review!

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