

---

The Nuclear Sublime

Author(s): Frances Ferguson

Source: *Diacritics*, Summer, 1984, Vol. 14, No. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984), pp. 4-10

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464754>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Diacritics*

JSTOR



# THE NUCLEAR SUBLIME

FRANCES FERGUSON

Recently I received a notice from State Farm Insurance with the following information about the coverage on my house:

– Under no circumstances *does your policy provide coverage for loss involving a nuclear incident.*

This would seem to offer a definitive account of the insurance industry's position on nuclear hazards – that the nuclear is what cannot be insured against, and there is something touching about the company's desire to communicate to its customers the fact that it considers the nuclear threat to be the ultimate one, the one that eludes its capacities to compensate one for one's losses. Yet the starkness of this statement of helplessness gives way to a series of other statements about the chinks in the insurance company's protective armor:

– Only if you have purchased a separate earthquake/volcano eruption endorsement to your policy *do you have coverage for loss involving these perils. Otherwise, you don't.*

– Only if you have purchased a separate flood insurance policy (available from your State Farm agent) *do you have coverage for loss involving flood or other excluded water damage. Your State Farm Homeowners Policy does not provide this coverage.*

– Collapse is covered under your policy, unless an event that's excluded – such as earthquake, earth movement or water damage – is involved. *In these cases, collapse is not covered.*

– Your policy does not cover home maintenance losses.

What is particularly important about the progression is of course that it obviously works its way down – from the threat of nuclear catastrophe to what used to pass for the apocalyptic (movings of the earth, eruptions of volcanoes, and Noah's particular version of loss, floods). The orderly progression of the series might be said to offer State Farm's version of the assurance from an old spiritual: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time." Noah might not have been able to insure against catastrophe by water, but you can (with a special endorsement to your policy); the Book of Revelation may make fire look particularly threatening, but you can deal with the terrors of any non-nuclear fire (with a special endorsement to your policy). The progress of civilization represented by the widening of the reach of insurance can extend itself to cover almost anything – anything except nuclear catastrophe on the one hand and "home maintenance losses" on the other.

What interests me particularly is not that a company can find a way to sell insurance by announcing that, while nuclear disasters are uninsurable, there happen to be a number of other kinds of disasters that are insurable while you're waiting for a nuclear disaster, but rather that the kind of progression that State Farm seizes upon recurs in a good deal of writing about the nuclear peril. Jonathan Schell, the writer who has most successfully identified himself as commanding the subtleties of nuclear annihilation, for instance, recapitulates State Farm's progress at greater length as he evokes the capacity of nuclear

weapons to annihilate the world and then expatiates on annihilation by finding ever more numerous forms of life to exempt from the totality he has imagined. Nuclear war would, most likely, quickly bring about the extinction of all forms of life, he maintains [3–4]; and he is particularly effective at communicating why this is so – nuclear weapons have an extraordinary range of destructive effects by which they achieve what we have routinely come to call their overkill. Should the “initial nuclear radiation” not kill us (and the air burst of a one-megaton bomb, “which is a medium-sized weapon in present-day nuclear arsenals,” yields enough initial radiation to “kill unprotected human beings in an area of some six square miles” [17]), the electromagnetic pulse generated would be “strong enough to damage solid-state electrical circuits” and “thus threaten to bring the economies” of the countries of North and South America “to a halt” [18]. The thermal pulse would produce further blinding light and intense heat; a blast wave from a one-megaton bomb would “flatten or severely damage all but the strongest buildings within a radius of four and a half miles” [18]; and local fallout from a one-megaton bomb detonated under average weather conditions would probably “lethally contaminate over a thousand square miles” [19]. And were these various destructive capacities not enough, “these primary effects produce innumerable secondary effects on societies and natural environments” [19], generating mass fires and destroying the ozone layer that shields earthly life from excessive amounts of the sun’s radiation. Moreover, should you imagine that you can hide in a fallout shelter, Schell’s account should disabuse you by informing you that radiation sickness would be likely to kill “everyone who failed to seal himself off from the outside environment for as long as several months” [60], and that the world that remained would be undesirable at best. Because of their different levels of tolerance for radiation, cattle would die before sheep, sheep before horses, horses before swine, and swine before poultry; and

*Unfortunately for the rest of the environment, many of the phytophagous species – insects that feed directly on vegetation – which “include some of the most ravaging species on earth” [according to Dr. Vernon M. Stern, an entomologist at the University of California at Riverside, writing in “Survival of Food Crops”], have very high tolerances, and so could be expected to survive disproportionately, and then to multiply greatly in the aftermath of an attack. The demise of their natural predators the birds would enhance their success. [62–63]*

In short, survival is presented as taking place in a world you wouldn’t want anyway – one that would, in an optimistic account, perhaps be inhabited by chickens and insects.

What strikes me as particularly fascinating in the accounts of nuclear holocaust that Schell and State Farm provide is that while Schell portrays himself as having determined to try to “think the unthinkable” and while State Farm discreetly moves on to other matters, they both suggest something of the difficulty of addressing the notion of nuclear destruction. Schell observes that “in spite of the immeasurable importance of nuclear weapons, the world has declined, on the whole, to think about them very much [4]; and State Farm succumbs to what, from Schell’s perspective, is the cowardly impulse to “decline” to think about nuclear holocaust very much. Thinking the unthinkable presents considerable difficulties, and Schell succeeds no better than State Farm, if we are to make a strict judgment in the matter. Invoking the unthinkable, however, is not only possible but a rather familiar feature of an aesthetic tradition that has operated over the last couple of centuries at least, and I would like to speak about the question of the nuclear by providing a brief genealogy for it in its role as the unthinkable.

For I take the nuclear as the unthinkable to be the most recent version of the notion of the sublime, that alternative and counterpoise to the beautiful that was revived when Longinus’ *Peri Hupsous* (*On Great Writing*) was rediscovered in the seventeenth century and became especially influential in the eighteenth. The only thing puzzling about the category, when one pauses to think about it, is the fact that the interest that attached to Longinus’ fragmentary manuscript and to the idea of the sublime generally should have developed at all. Aesthetics had for centuries gotten by on the notion of beauty in relation to aesthetic objects, and the addition of the sublime to aesthetic discussion registers the entrance of an intriguing dissatisfaction with beauty. And this dissatisfaction with beauty precisely concerns

the notion of individuality and self-preservation, for the eighteenth-century interest in the sublime is always in the thing that is bigger than any individual, and specifically bigger in terms of being more powerful and, usually, more threatening. As Edmund Burke, the chief proponent of an empiricist account of sublimity puts it, we love the beautiful as what submits to us, while we fear the sublime as what we must submit to.

The trick with the sublime, of course, is that we live to tell the tale of our encounters with it – which is of course one good reason why even Burke cannot sustain a thoroughgoing empiricism about the sublime – because it never proves to be quite as deadly in experience as it had in thought. But though the sublime may come to seem an increasingly rare thing (since you presumably become less afraid of, say, Mont Blanc than you were on your first encounter with it), it nonetheless retains a powerful hold on aesthetic discussion, largely because of its usefulness in helping an individual to identify himself, to attach himself to a consciousness of his own individuality.

The sublime object is particularly important in attaching one to consciousness of oneself because it quickly comes to be defined as no object at all, because it gets defined, most notably by Kant, as what cannot stand alone, without a supplementary human consciousness. Thus, Kant remarks that “we express ourselves incorrectly if we call any *object of nature* sublime, although we can quite correctly call many objects of nature beautiful. . . . All that we can say is that the object is fit for the presentation of a sublimity which can be found in the mind, for no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so-called” [83–84]. And a considerable portion of the force of his verbal discrimination is to found the sublime as a species of experience that explicitly does not ground itself in objects. For the sublime, insofar as it finds fit objects, involves those that are “great beyond all measure,” objects, that is, that specifically elude the apprehension we think ourselves to have of the objects of our perceptions. The elusiveness of the sublime – the way it is specifically a counter to our cognition of natural objects – becomes even clearer when Kant remarks that “we must seek a ground external to ourselves for the beautiful of nature, but seek it for the sublime merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought, which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature” [84].

The sublime then might seem to testify to subjectivity, and while it certainly does bespeak the operations of subjectivity, the peculiar form of the relationship between consciousness and its objects in the sublime may serve to indicate the way in which the sublime is increasingly enlisted in the search for a unique and individual subjectivity, a personal and personalized consciousness. For when Kant stipulates that no man-made objects, no products of human art, can be sublime, that exclusion of the man-made from what can be called sublime constitutes an exclusion of objects that can be seen under the rubric of property. For the peculiar feature of the sublime is that it affirms individual identity at the expense of the notion of private ownership and the privileged access that seems to be accorded an owner and in that sense exposes not so much a drive into spirituality as a dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed by the notion of property. The trouble with property is that its essential nature is not determined by its owner; it would not be property unless it were exchangeable, unless it were alienable and survived the process of being removed from its original owner. The virtue of the sublime is that it cannot be exchanged, that each experience of sublimity is permanently bound not just to a subjective judgment but to its particular subjective judge.

The intensity, moreover, of the commitment of the sublime to the promotion of individuality in the form of irreplaceable subjectivity becomes apparent in another feature of the descriptions of the sublime. The sublime comes increasingly to seem like the repudiation of all accidents. Just as the possibility of the exchange of aesthetic objects somehow qualifies out of existence the claims of the individual subject to uniqueness and irreplaceability (for the aesthetic object continues to exist in John Doe’s possession just as it did in mine), so the insistence in accounts of the sublime on the subject’s determination of his own death comes to be a way of underscoring the sublime determination to remove itself from the world of objects subject to accidents. Thus when Schiller describes suicide, taking one’s own death into one’s own hands, as the inevitable outcome of the logic of the sublime, he is of course right: the outcome of the subject’s search for self-determination is not the achievement of absolute freedom in a positive form but rather the achievement of a freedom from the conditions of existence by means of one’s nonexistence.

In that sense, the notion of the sublime is continuous with the notion of nuclear holocaust: to think the sublime would be to think the unthinkable and to exist in one's own nonexistence. And just as the sublime continually fails in its promise in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics because its threat cannot deliver a consciousness of individual identity that seems more than a temporary delusion, so the effort to think the nuclear sublime in terms of its absoluteness dwindles from the effort to imagine total annihilation to something very much like calculations of exactly how horrible daily life would be after a significant nuclear explosion. But whereas Schell would most likely see that progression as a mere evasion, what interests me is the commitment to the sublime notion of crisis, and I would like to explore it a bit more to suggest something of the purpose it serves.

The suggestion raised as the most appalling in *The Fate of the Earth* is not merely that the earth might be devastated by nuclear holocaust but that such devastation might occur by accident. Schell notes that "On three occasions in the last couple of years, American nuclear forces were placed on the early stages of alert: twice because of the malfunctioning of a computer chip in the North American Air Defense Command's warning system, and once when a test tape depicting a missile attack was inadvertently inserted in the system. The greatest danger in computer-generated misinformation and other mechanical errors may be that one error might start a chain reaction of escalating responses between command centers, leading, eventually, to an attack" [26–27]. This information is, from one perspective, truly sublime—the image of mechanical errors infinitely proliferating corresponds to an image of thought continuing to infinity, having overcome the resistance represented by interference with its progress. From another perspective, however, it suggests precisely the world that the evocation of the sublime is supposed to shield you from: the accident that tells one how radically he/she is subject to—or object of—conditions, circumstances.

Schell's book, like many another evocation of the sublime, invokes the specter of accidental nuclear holocaust not just to promote all of our impulses toward self-preservation but also to make us love the world of our conditions. The sublime renewal of our consciousness of the desire for self-preservation both frees us from the sense of our being bound by the world of circumstances beyond our control and also returns us to the world of circumstances with a certain benevolence toward them, as if a commitment to our own survival could easily be translated into a commitment to a world of conditions that repeatedly appears as the world of society and domestic life. And in that sense it is perfectly plausible for the Women's Initiatives for Peace to argue that "It is difficult, as one woman put it, 'to imagine Congress ignoring the moral authority of a contingent of visibly pregnant women'" and to "implore" women demonstrating in Washington on May 10 to "involve as many infants and children as possible." Yet however much moral authority an army of infants and pregnant women might have, however great the horror of contemplating the extinction of what Schell calls the generations of the unborn, one might well be anxious about the effectiveness of appealing to the world of generation. For when in the eighteenth century an aesthetics of sublimity emerges as a means of providing testimony to the uniqueness of individual consciousness, it portrays a world in which the status of objects is progressively attenuated so as to suggest that it is subjectivity rather than the mere fact of the existence of objects that gives things their force. And the pressure of the sublime claim of individuality is all the more urgent because the world of generation is largely what is being fled in an aesthetics of sublimity. The sublime claims that the beautiful is the world of society under the aegis of women and children, and that the habit, custom, and familiarity of that world of generation is what it was avoiding all along, in the nobler search for heroic encounter with the possibility of one's own death and a resulting consciousness of the importance of self-preservation. Putting women and children first, then, may function as a rationale for avoiding nuclear disaster, but one may also feel some dismay in the face of the recognition that such a justification for the continuation of individual existence has not previously held particular sway. The legendary efforts made, for instance, while the Titanic was sinking to give women and children the first places in the life boats, turn out to have been merely the stuff of legends—stories from survivors who were imagining their own survivals as more precarious and less compromised by the deaths of others than the actual roster of survivors would suggest. Moreover, Schell's appeal to our philanthropy in imagining that future generations cannot exist without our continued existence has all the virtues of flattery, for it offers a model in which our conviction that we act



philanthropically enables us to insist on preserving our own particular and individual selves now.

Schell's urgent plea turns on the notion of generation in the name of the "unborn": "Because the unborn generations will never experience their cancellation by us [Schell's version of a pre-conception abortion, the murder of what is by no organic definition alive], we have to look for the consequences of extinction before it occurs, in our own lives . . ." [169], he writes; and later, "For while it is true that extinction cannot be felt by those whose fate it is—the unborn, who would stay unborn—the same cannot be said, of course, for extinction's alternative, survival. If we shut the unborn out of life, they will never have a chance to lament their fate, but if we let them into life, they will have abundant opportunity to be glad that they were born instead of having been prenatally severed from existence by us" [171]; and again, "the unborn generations would be prevented from ever existing" [172].

Schell's invocation of the "unborn" gestures toward the consciousness of the future in amiable enough fashion, but there seems to be also a note of horror that attaches to the "unborn" in whose name Schell would authorize our preservation of the species. For the "unborn" sound curiously like the "undead" out of science fiction; like the "undead," the "unborn" compromise the position of the living. To think the thought of the "unborn" may represent the achievement of the sublime project to find objects of consciousness that definitively cannot exist in the absence of the perceiving subject, but the residual horror of the notion of the "unborn" lies in the way the argument for the existence of generations now living lies in our mere instrumentality.

Schell, then, justifies nuclear disarmament precisely in terms of an appeal to consciousness that is always figured as a privileged object *because of its nonexistence*, and he thus suggests what seems to me the predicament that the aesthetics of sublimity seems designed partially to alleviate: the claustrophobic feeling that one has become totally conditioned by being surrounded by other consciousnesses. And it is in this regard that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is of some interest, for I would like to suggest that *Frankenstein* has in the last fifteen years or so been rescued from neglect and/or contempt not just because of its greatness or because it was written by a woman but rather because it figures the Gothic reversal of the sublime dream of self-affirmation, the fear that the presence of other people is totally invasive and erosive of the self. Thus, Victor Frankenstein, whose biological researches have conspicuously removed him from his family and society, discovers the principle of life in the past—or in his present extensions of the work of a forgotten past, the researches of Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus. And he prospectively imagines himself as a kind of ideal parent: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" [49]. What happens, of course, is that while Victor describes himself as a creator, he acts in such a manner as to suggest a distinction between creation (as the production of other consciousnesses) and invention (as the production of objects that testify to the existence of one's own consciousness); he infinitely prefers invention. In discovering the principle of life, he does not, as he had wished, invent something that would reflect him back to himself in magnified form but instead, as if by an accident that befalls his intention, creates a being whom he continually identifies as monstrous largely because this being is continually reminding Victor of *his* rights and Victor's duties toward *him*.

This dynamic of opposition between Victor and the monster suggests, moreover, a more fundamental opposition: while the sublime courts the feeling of overextension as a version of individual freedom, the social world of the beautiful recoils at the way the notion of individual freedom seems stretched too thin to accommodate its various claimants. And in *Frankenstein* the very notion of overextension comes to be something like the sign of the monster's monstrosity. His skin is too tight. One of the paradoxes of *Frankenstein* is that the monster, from the moment of his animation, is seen as hideous although Victor specifically describes the pains he has gone to to select all the best and most beautiful parts for him. He asks of his journal on the event of the monster's "birth": "How can I delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath . . ." [52]. The monster, in other

words, is stretched too thin, as if his skin represented an unsuccessful effort to impose unity on his various disparate parts. Moreover, this imagery of stretching as a strained effort to create unity out of a multiplicity of elements is recapitulated in the Frankenstein family's generous efforts to include an ever-growing number of individuals. The Frankenstein family, in a spirit of philanthropic territorial imperialism, quickly assimilates Elizabeth Lavenza (alternatively Victor's cousin and an Italian foundling in the two different editions), the servant girl Justine, and Victor's friend Henry Clerval and begins to treat them like brothers, sisters, and children. And though M. and Mme. Frankenstein get credit from Victor for being "tender parents" with a great consciousness of the rights of children and a parent's duties toward them, the path into the future in which Victor is the "destined successor" to all his father's "labours and utility" becomes perilous because the family comes to be so populous that Victor seems to imagine his identity ebbing because his rights, his freedom have to be shared.

*Frankenstein* provides a kind of parable to be read into our thinking about the nuclear precisely, I think, because of the way in which it registers the progress of philanthropy toward the unborn as it moves from a concern with establishing a sense of Victor's selfhood by means of the invention of another to a kind of counting down to one as Victor repeatedly imagines the grief of his loved ones should the monster kill him – and imagines their grief at exactly the same time as those potential mourners are themselves killed off. Something like Victor, Schell writes that "By acting to save the species, and repopulating the future, we break out of the cramped, claustrophobic isolation of a doomed present, and open a path to a greater space – the only space fit for human habitation – of past, present, and future" [172], and he steps back from the sense of imminent nuclear peril to imagine us transcending it, colonizing the future in a noble extension of ourselves. He's right, of course, to want to preserve the planet, the human species, and human culture, but what is particularly striking about his imagery is its portrayal of nuclear threat as a temporal version of claustrophobia that is ultimately less terrifying than the Gothic claustrophobia repeatedly brought on by the pressure of the thought of other minds acting to condition an individual and his dream of the uniqueness of his consciousness.

The nuclear sublime, then, operates much like most other versions of the sublime, in that it imagines freedom to be threatened by a power that is consistently mislocated. For in a society that has recently become increasingly conscious of and fascinated with such problems as child abuse, anorexia, and passive smoking, one might well question the weight of the claims of the unborn in the light of the way these problems indicate the difficulty of our granting the existence of a number of individuals already extant. Jeffrey Masson's effort to discredit Freudian psychology because he takes child abuse to have been real for Freud's patients may operate with a touchingly naive version of reality and reference, but what Masson's case suggests is that child abuse – whether more or less prevalent than before – seems more real to us now. The child abuser attempts to cancel out parental duties to the child. The anorexic simulates nonexistence, as if to try to avoid crowding anyone with excessive demands, or as if to preempt abuse from a parent by incorporating it into the structure of existence. And the consciousness that many persons have of violence being done to them by virtue of their being exposed to the smoke of other people's cigarettes suggests the difficulty of achieving a social unity that is not overextended by the competing demands of its various members. In other words, the existence of other people seems like an accident that has befallen us.

For although the eighteenth century can be seen to have initiated a steady drive toward the production of more and more individuals with a claim on freedom (children, slaves, women, perhaps even the unborn), phenomena like child abuse, anorexia, and passive smoking bespeak a certain social annoyance with how much space these individuals seem to take up. To march off into a future free from nuclear peril is, from one direction, to free ourselves from claustrophobia, but it is, from another, merely to evade the claustrophobia inspired by the pressures of intersubjectivity, the kind of claustrophobia that keeps Jack in *The Shining* from ever feeling that a spectacularly enormous hotel is big enough to hold a man, a woman, and a child; the kind of claustrophobia that Yeats' dolls feel as they hear the wife speaking to her husband of the child who needs maintenance, "Dear, oh dear, it was an accident." It is no wonder that State Farm can't insure against home maintenance losses.

Could it insure against home maintenance losses, however, it would, I think, be able to insure against nuclear disaster.

#### REFERENCES

- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*, J. H. Bernard, trans., New York: Hafner Press, 1951.
- Schell, Jonathan. *The Fate of the Earth*, New York: Avon Books, 1982.
- Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein*, James Rieger, ed., Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1974.