

Out of the Darkness AND INTO THE SUBLIME

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The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related, that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous, makes the sublime again.

– Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part II, 1795

Kelly Richardson presents wavering hybrids of fact and fiction that serve as visual metaphors for modern reality in order to question our place in the world. Referencing political, cultural, societal, and environmental issues, her body of work is informed by both past and present. Richardson grew up in Guelph, Ontario, and much of her early work plays off of this environment, presenting the viewer with ubiquitous imagery that at first seems plausible but quickly shifts into a realm of uncertainty. Over the past ten years, she has increasingly adapted a cinematic vernacular,

rooted in science fiction, horror, and the apocalyptic sublime, that captures the arresting beauty of sublimity and evokes our awe and trepidation of it. Although Richardson embraces the affinity she feels toward historical depictions of The Sublime, hers is a visual language that does not rely on depictions of grandeur arising from endless chasms and vast ocean sweeps; instead, it is a more progressive interpretation that questions society's role by presenting the ruined impression humanity has left on the natural world. Among environmental decay, man-made landscapes, and suburban sprawl, Richardson's oeuvre renews an extensive lineage in literature and painting to summon fear and confront it head-on. Although throughout the course of history our emotional ties to the landscape and our aesthetic desires have morphed at a rapid pace, for the duration of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, The Sublime has become progressively elusive against a backdrop of increased dissolution and dwindling natural resources.



FIG. 1 A fairly ubiquitous image of the Gas Pillars in the Eagle Nebula taken by The Hubble Space Telescope, 1995.

According to Richardson, The Sublime as it was originally conceived still exists in two main places: the digital landscape and space exploration.¹ When the Hubble Space Telescope deployed on April 25, 1990, the images procured were nothing short of riveting in their depictions of an expansive sky pregnant with vivacious colors, swirling galaxies, distant planets, and endless clusters of luminous stars. [FIG. 1] To researchers, these images are engaging because they depict data and long-sought-after details about the universe we inhabit. The rest of the world, however, reacts solely to their unquestionably pleasing aesthetic. Science fiction film relies on this type of imagery. With so much unknown about what exists beyond the earthly terrain, audiences are eager to consume all it has to offer. Though science fiction is often comingled with the genre of fantasy, what uniquely sets it apart is that within its narrative context, innovative liberties are made plausible through scientific clarification established within the plotline. Although the genre has no doubt extended into a host of subgenres, including sci-fi fantasies, horror, and cyberpunk, various science fiction explanations always come into play: time travel, space travel, alien or alternate life-forms, newly established social systems, paranormal activity,

technological advancements, and the perceived advantages of future worlds. As with any genre of film, we must also account for what the viewer brings to the narrative. Given that the settings for science fiction are most often contradictory to existing realities, suspension of disbelief is a key factor for establishing such modern mythologies.

Overused and often misapprehended, the concept of The Sublime represents more than just beauty. It extends beyond being awe-inspiring, propels itself against perfection, ignites deep veneration, and puts us in our place, reminding us of our infinitesimal role within the natural world—a world that for centuries humankind has tried to predict and control. Ultimately, however, it is also a world humankind has corrupted—but not without consequences. In Greece, as early as the first century AD, ruminations on the bond between the human condition and that which is inexplicable have been attributed to one of the first-recognized literary critics, known as Longinus, and his treatise *On the Sublime*. Although little is known about his life, Longinus's thoughts on the concept of The Sublime, which sought to explain something above the ordinary that captured the "essence of simplicity," have been exceptionally influential. This concept has slowly evolved into a complex of theories seeking to quantify intellectual, physical, spiritual, or artistic "greatness." Focusing his ruminations on the effect that good writing can have on a reader, Longinus critically either celebrates or rebukes select examples of literary works in order to affirm that an author's main goal should be to "arouse emotion in his audience." However, Longinus was not unaware of nature's impact, stating,

Nature in her loftier and more passionate moods, while detesting all appearance of restraint, is not wont to show herself utterly wayward and reckless; and though in all cases the vital informing principle is derived from her, yet to determine the right degree and experience, is the peculiar province of scientific method. The great passions, when left to their own blind and rash impulses without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let drive at random without ballast. Often they need the spur, but sometimes also the curb.²

The quest for The Sublime plays an integral role in visual aesthetics. A kindred bond must arise between the artist and his or her subject as well as between the viewer and a work of art. The establishment of these relationships channels an impact through which emotion, spirit, and the power of being are brought into play through a singular human need not only to seek out but also to experience greatness. This concept is further augmented by traditional art-historical notions of The Sublime, exemplified by the dramatic and poignant landscapes of English painters Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner. But it is the luminous, writhing, apocalyptic landscapes of John Martin [FIG. 2]—in his quest to depict the natural world as both awe-inspiring and foreboding, not unlike the dichotomy between heaven and hell—that embody the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke's theories on The Sublime. Such approaches to The Sublime emerged during a period of great social change, as people revolted against the confines of the Industrial Revolution and abhorred the growing amount of scientific rationalizations of the natural world. Martin's work offered escape and a compulsory energy that resonated with his contemporary



FIG. 2 : John Martin (British, 1789–1854) : *The Great Day of His Wrath*, 1851–53 : Oil paint on canvas. Support: 7.7' x 119.4"; Framed: 94.5" x 136.6" x 6.9". Collection Tate Britain, 1945.

British public, as crowds consistently gathered in large queues to see his work. Burke, who likened fear and The Sublime with obscurity, describes this relationship as a sensation that overcomes people and tantalizes them with notions of the unknown.³ Encounters with the unexplored, uncharted, and unexplained appeal to the human condition, but it is the experience of terror that is thought to lead to The Sublime, given its ability to momentarily cleanse the mind of all other emotional content. There is an allure to the unknown, and one quality of human nature is to seek out frightening experiences. For Richardson, the "unknown" is her calling card.

On July 9, 1975, Dutch-born conceptual filmmaker, performance artist, and photographer Bas Jan Ader set sail from the East Coast of the United States to Falmouth, England, as part of an art performance titled *In Search of the Miraculous*. A mere three weeks into what was to be a sixty-day journey, all radio contact was lost with his vessel, and Ader was considered lost at sea. In April 1976, his boat emerged off the southwest coast of Ireland, but his body was never found. Ader, whose work revels in the romance of emotional tragedy and the quest for The Sublime, conceived the performance as a trilogy of solo endeavors documenting his coast-to-coast journey: a torch-lit nighttime walk through the hills of Los Angeles to the water's edge, the trip across the Atlantic, and another nocturnal walk, this time through the city of Amsterdam. Although Ader's premature death prevented the completion of the three-part performance, his quixotic and perilous venture embodies a classic "man vs. nature" scenario. An adventurer at heart, Ader surrendered himself up to the forces of the open water, which he thought to be the last truly free place on earth. The question, however, underlying Ader's disappearance is more than just malaise of "what if?" Having attempted the voyage without much knowledge of the sea, let alone expertise, he left us to question the outcome as accidental or intentional. In any true quest for The Sublime, one must give oneself up to both the Romantic myth and the powerful forces behind its beauty. If Ader's final performance was the ultimate gesture to Mother Nature's greatness, we are left to wonder: What is left to offer?

American writer and art critic Thomas McEvelley writes, “The Romantic artist or poet hero was a visionary of the sublime, an eavesdropper on the approach of the end of the world.”⁴ Terror, although rooted in eighteenth-century notions of The Sublime, is one of many reflections on the subject that, from a postmodernist point of view, places visual culture within the context of conflict, power, and the human experience. Unlike its predecessors, in which terror gave way to delight in the face of nature, The Sublime has traversed many dialogues beyond the painter’s canvas and the writer’s page. We must speculate on its multidisciplinary applications, as human beings continue to seek out answers for that which is inexplicable in scientific and religious discourses. The genre of science fiction touches on every known aspect of social and cultural life in a manner that is unprecedented within the greater film genre. Over the years, science fiction has evolved to encompass philosophical concepts provoked by subliminal human fears, a sense of immensity, and infinite possibility that set the human subject against a vast backdrop to incite a sense of sublimity. What’s more, science fiction has become a sounding board for a broader discourse on the human condition. From a more comedic approach to what the future may—or may not—hold, such as Woody Allen’s sci-fi spoof *Sleeper* (1973) to post-apocalyptic depictions of earthly ruin, as seen in *The Road* (2009), sci-fi offers myriad building blocks for developing sublime imagery. For more than a century, these films have offered up imaginative settings, unthinkable quests, unfeasible technologies, and inexplicable life-forms to viewers. In 1902 French filmmaker Georges Méliès released his groundbreaking masterpiece *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*). Revered for creating one of the first films of its kind, Méliès, who was primarily a stage magician, incorporated basic special effects to achieve cinematic illusion. Created using a series of photographic tricks, dissolves, and cuts, the experimental film thrilled audiences and paved the way for many future simulated trips to the moon. Space exploration did subsequently become a viable topic in film, but it was not until the 1950s that the genre also became viable at the box office. Often referred to the “Golden Age” of science fiction, the 1950s brought corny dialogue, second-rate acting, and amateurish production values to the big screen. Audiences ate it up; they could not get enough of rockets, aliens, and intergalactic

tourism. What entices the viewer to suspend his or her disbelief, however, is a similar, albeit more gratuitous, progression of narrative and sublime imagery that was developed in the genre of B-horror movies. Moreover, it is through these terrifying images and stories that the well-populated and sometimes overlooked genres of science fiction and horror films have found their niche. And it is through this very same imagery and chronicle that Kelly Richardson discovered her own portal into The Sublime.

Primarily referred to as “slasher,” “stalker,” or “splatter” films, B-horror films employ purposely gratuitous violence to seek an automatic response from the viewer. By playing on our primordial fears and inherent misgivings about the unknown, movies such as *Black Christmas* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), and *Friday the 13th* (1980) embody the perfect storm of morally depraved storylines coupled with young adult victims placed in secluded or seemingly vulnerable locations where mysterious killers lurk in the shadows. Faced with camera shots depicting the point of view of the assailant and hauntingly grating musical scores, we often find ourselves viewing the duration of these movies through the gaps between our fingers as we cover our faces with our hands. Richardson grew up watching films like these, and, she admits, she still does. There is something rather captivating about the films produced during the 1970s and 1980s, along with their mirroring generations who grew up watching, forever haunted by the inkling that Jason Voorhees was lurking somewhere, out there, in the wilderness. The anticipatory moments from such films serve as the impetus behind Richardson’s *Supernatural Series*. [FIG. 3] From 2001 to 2004, Richardson combed through countless hours of slasher and horror sci-fi movies in search of moments within the narratives when the landscape serves as a precursor to or endnote of the typical scream-scene massacre, then isolated these fleeting moments to produce photographs. Richardson’s selections, although reminiscent of nature, are ultimately foreboding and mockingly referential about the predictability of such storylines. Her appropriation of this imagery, however, is not so matter-of-fact. These serene moments, devoid of human presence, leave the viewer questioning the nature of the real threat: Is it the natural world that we fear—or ourselves?

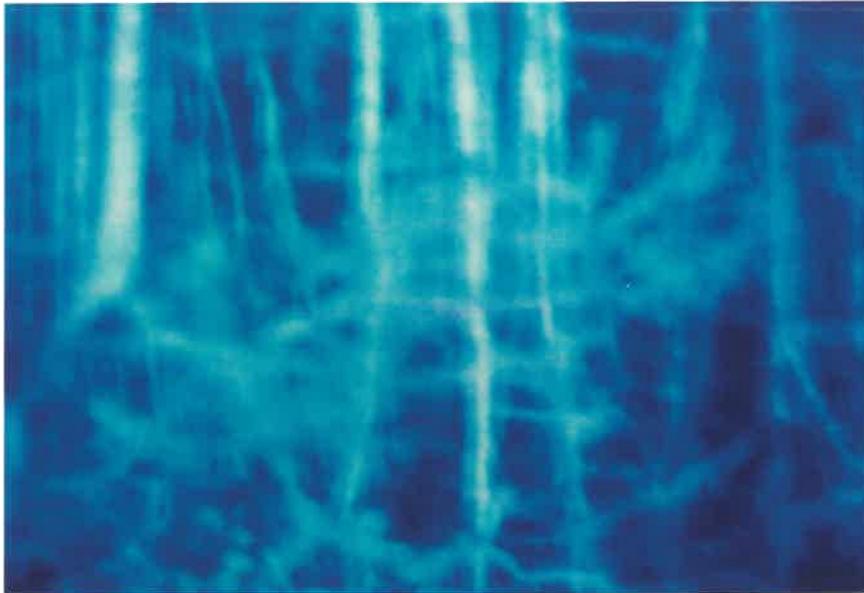


FIG. 3 : Kelly Richardson : *Supernatural Series, Friday The 13th*, 2001–2004 : 39" x 32".

About this series, Richardson laments that the culmination of fear in such films relies on our own preexisting distrust in the unpredictable forces of nature. Murky skies, tangles of trees, the distortion of mist, and the proverbial twinkle of moonlight signify impending doom—but only in the movies. The artist has commented, "What is it about us and nature? We view ourselves as being separate from it and most often represent it, the 'other' nature, as something to be greatly feared. The opposite is actually true: we're entirely dependent on nature for our survival and we are far more likely to meet our end within an urban setting."⁵ In 2008, Richardson revisited these transitory moments in film with her series *Scene Setters*. Unlike the foreboding, mined imagery of *Supernatural Series*, *Scene Setters* includes photographs taken by Richardson to specifically depict ambiguous images of landscapes. Albeit picturesque, each scene imparts an artificiality that is difficult to articulate, yet they are eerily effective in persuading the imagination just enough that we buy into the rest of the story, whatever it may be.

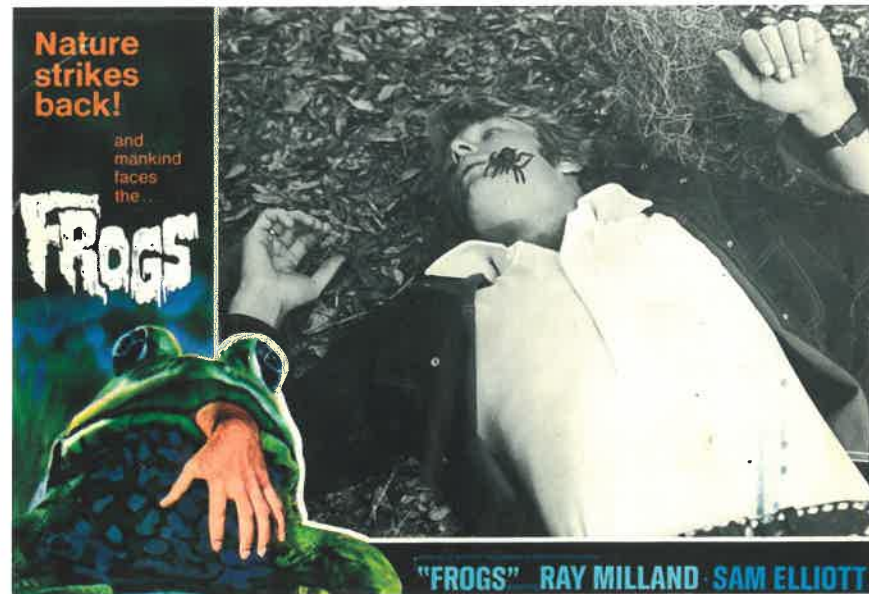


FIG. 4 : *Frogs* movie poster, © 1972 Orion Pictures Corporation. Courtesy of MGM Media Licensing

Some of the earliest video work Richardson executed, such as *Camp* (2001) and *There's a Lot There* (2001), were filmed much in the same manner as the campy films that contribute to her earliest iconographies. Unable to afford a video camera of her own, Richardson borrowed cameras from friends and headed for the woods in search of the very moments in nature she would later create with the aid of digital animation. Even in these earliest works, the fundamentals of science fiction narrative are at play. In *There's a Lot There* the viewer is forced into a first-person perspective, confronted by seemingly thousands of hostile, buzzing mosquitoes perched on the other side of a screen door. In their frantic, humming fury, eating the viewer alive is no doubt their desire. Reminiscent of low-budget sci-fi horror flicks of the 1970s in which nature *always* strikes back, such as *Frogs* (1972), *Squirm* (1976), *Piranha* (1978), and *The Swarm* (1978) [FIG. 4], *There's a Lot There* waggishly apprehends both the arresting beauty of nature and our repulsion at it. However, 2001 brought considerable changes for Richardson. In trying to make *A car stopped at a*

stop sign in the middle of nowhere, in front of a landscape (2001), [FIG. 5] she states, “the work changed her practice significantly.” The thirty-minute loop represents the first video she digitally manipulated after purchasing her first kit. By isolating a rather funny instance in the notoriously bad sci-fi flick *Circuitry Man* (1990), in which a car stops at a stop sign in the middle of the desert, Richardson hoped to “take a moment and make it last forever.” The lower horizon of the film’s landscape is paused, and the sky has been replaced with a scrolling video of an expansive blue sky full of billowing clouds. In essence, it is a B-movie turned B-movie.⁶

In Jean-François Lyotard’s 1982 essay “Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime,” he states, “The sublime is not simple gratification but the gratification of effort. It is impossible to represent the absolute, which is ungratifying; but one knows that one has to, that the faculty of feeling or imagining is called upon to make the perceptible represent the ineffable—and even if this fails, and even if that causes suffering, a pure gratification



FIG. 5 : Kelly Richardson : *A car stopped at a stop sign in the middle of nowhere, in front of a landscape*, 2001, installation view: NGCA

will emerge from the tensions.”⁷ As the concept of journeying to the moon became increasingly popular during the mid-twentieth century, so did films about space exploration. George Pal’s 1950 film *Destination Moon* depicts American astronauts landing on the moon nineteen years before the United States pulled ahead in the “space race” by accomplishing the feat on July 20, 1969. The film, which skillfully presented realistic depictions of rocket ships and the intimacies of the lunar surface, won Pal an Academy Award for special effects. Even more notable is a sequence of references to space as a developing combat zone with the Soviet Union for technological superiority. Although the genre’s basis is firmly rooted in Utopian ideals and the innocence and excitement garnered by the possibilities of visiting other planets to settle into an idyllic world, it was not long before sci-fi responded to topics more germane to the growing suspicions, anxieties, and perceived menaces to the American public. In 2010, Richardson purposefully sought to create a work that specifically referenced a lunar-looking landscape. [FIG. 6] Filmed in Alberta, Canada, at Dinosaur Provincial



FIG. 6 : Kelly Richardson on location, Dinosaur Provincial Park, 2009

Park, one of the most quickly eroding landscapes on earth, *The Erudition* is unquestionably one of Richardson's eeriest works. Her first three-channel projection—or, as she refers to them, "set extensions"—the immense installation forces the viewer to engage with the work on several visual levels, as it deals with not only the placement of the viewer's body within the projection's frame, but also the activation of a peripheral viewing space. The imagery, emotionally haunting in its depiction of a holographic fledgling forest struggling to survive, calls to mind a host of possibilities for its existence. Is this the future of earth's terrain, or are we on another planet? Is it a memorial to nature that has been forgotten and is beginning to shut itself down? Or have humans come, conquered, and moved on to acquire more natural resources? Although we may never know the true apologue behind *The Erudition's* imagery, one thing is for certain: what we see is outside the order of things. Because trees are so integral to reducing erosion and moderating the climate, a world in which trees become decorative holographs is one void of human existence, at least as we currently know it. Such ambiguity in the work's imagery is a deliberate ploy. By tapping into global reference points, but leaving little account for where or why the landscape exists, Richardson explains that the possible various readings the work can elicit "make the work much richer by tapping into a multitude of interests."⁸

The looming threat of atomic warfare following World War II precipitated the development of mutant monster films within the science fiction film genre. Given the development of atomic science and the threat of bomb deployment, an uneasy relationship strengthened between science and humanity. About this critical turning point in film, author Alan Nadel states, "Inherently acquisitive and global, the wide-screen format attempted to suggest the sublime through the proliferation of mundane details, thus participating in the same narrative as American foreign policy."⁹ Often presenting a narrative in which humans have somehow interfered with the natural order of things, classic creature features, such as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), merge political commentary with larger-than-life spectacle. Based on a short story by Ray Bradbury, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* tells the tale of atomic testing gone awry in the Arctic Circle that

subsequently melts the ice and releases the *Rhedosaurus* monster, which then wreaks havoc on New York. Although man prevails in the end, it is the military that saves the day. The creation of such external threats, whose intentions toward humans are confrontational and audaciously hostile, is the direct result of humankind's desire for domination and the implementation of scientific warfare.

In a similar vein, *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), based on the novel by Michael Crichton, focuses on the fears ignited by space exploration. [FIG. 7] A military satellite reenters the earth's atmosphere and lands in a small town in New Mexico, killing all but two of its residents, an alcoholic and a baby, who are left for military doctors to study in order to decipher what has happened. In the end, the stricture of the military and the self-imposed limitations of scientific research become the cause of humanity's demise. What is so striking about applications of The Sublime in this film is the composition of believability within a plot earmarked by banal yet substantiated details. Furthermore, the seemingly methodical presentation of key characters—survivors, doctors, and military personnel—as well as scenes integral to the story's development, allow the viewer to dwell on the film's scientific and technological details rather than getting caught up in the gruesomeness of death. However, the film was subject to a



FIG. 7 : Still from *The Andromeda Strain*, 1971 : © 1971 Universal City Studios, Inc.

plethora of critical fallout because of its slow progression and reliance on diagrammatic special effects. In a review of the film, critic Pauline Kael points out, "Instead of the expected and promised narrative progression toward resolution, the initial narrative question is abandoned for another at the last possible moment: Can the scientists escape the underground laboratory before it self-destructs?"¹⁰ Nonetheless, science fiction film scholar Vivian Sobchank goes on to point out that the film "is made coherent and structurally unified by its visual emphasis."¹¹

Whereas Richardson's career has shown an elegant progression of critical content and references to The Sublime, from *The Erudition* through her most recent work, we can also see a loudening of these attributes in her work, followed by a heightened response to the technological and digital sublime. Science fiction film has followed a similar path and has subsequently been elevated to new levels that falter between terrains of reality and fiction. Enter a generation of blockbuster sci-fi films, beginning with the introduction of George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy in 1977 through the turn of the twenty-first century. From Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), set in a dystopian 2019 featuring genetically engineered organic robots called 'replicants', to the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999), which introduces the possibility that the reality of day-to-day living is not what it seems, the shift in our fear of technology to our unease with our inevitable resonance in the digital landscape has congruently lifted The Sublime out of nature and into a world completely fabricated by humans. According to Richardson, "We experience ourselves as powerless to this new 'techscape' and its infinite, uncontrollable mass. Ultimately, with a certain sense of terror we have transformed ourselves, existing now as hybrid human/posthuman entities living somewhere between place and non-place."¹²

However, it was unquestionably James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) that elevated science fiction film, as an arena for philosophical interpretation, to a new level of sophistication. In this record-smashing cult classic, known for its spare dialogue and its post-apocalyptic depiction of an Earth overrun by robotic war machines, Arnold Schwarzenegger plays the iconic role of a time-traveling cyborg sent back to the present day with



FIG. 8 : Still from *The Terminator* : © 1984 Cinema '84, A Greenberg Brothers Partnership. All Rights Reserved.

orders to kill the mother of the militia leader destined to lead the rebellion against the mechanical devices. While the majority of the film is dark, filmed in jerky sequences against an urban terrain, it is surprisingly complex in its treatment of The Sublime, and the way it plays out amongst various themes of time travel, social engineering, and gentrification as explored through man's struggle against "the machine." Within the narrative exists a secondary sequence of events culminating at the end of the film, when the pregnant heroine Sarah Conner is seen driving through Mexico and a boy takes a photograph of her, which she purchases before driving off into a vast landscape laden with the threat of an approaching storm. [FIG. 8] Although future events are foreshadowed throughout the film, the poignancy of this scene is fostered in its deployment of the landscape as a premonitory device. This landscape is not only reminiscent of nineteenth-century landscape painting, but is also strangely aligned with the painter George Inness's philosophy that humankind's relationship with nature should be equal and harmonious, with neither dominating

the existence of the other. In his work *The Coming Storm* (1878) [FIG. 9], in which a farmer tills his landscape while cattle feed beneath the canopy of an approaching storm, Inness sought to articulate God's immanence in every living thing and nature's power to uplift both the morale and spirit of those who choose to spend time contemplating it. But in a world where the importance of spirituality and a concordant relationship with the natural world is, at best, wavering, this scene is a fitting final act for a prelude to *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), set ten years in the future. Albeit the cliché of riding off into the sunset has historical connotations as a tried-and-true ending signifying new beginnings, the finale of *The Terminator* relays a darker message. Released on the cusp of the digital age and in the face of advancing technologies, the film struck fear into the hearts of moviegoers. Fear of progress and the future looms, but most of all *The Sublime* tends to appear in the most unlikely of places. The Dutch seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza once said, "Fear cannot be without hope, nor hope without fear."¹³ As Sarah Connor drives into the unknown, determined



FIG. 9 : George Inness (American, 1825–1894) : *The Coming Storm*, 1878 : Oil on canvas. Support: 66.04 x 99.06 cm : Framed: 93.98 x 127 x 10.15 cm : Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Albert H. Tracy Fund, 1900.

to change the future, we are reminded of our own existence in this world and our inability to predict the future, let alone change our fate.

Following the sci-fi boom of the 1950s, during the 1960s the film industry saw a rapid decrease in the production of the genre, until, the scholar Christine Cornea notes, "the virtuosity of Stanley Kubrick's high-budget *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) introduced images that both eclipsed and challenged the realness of those that NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] was providing in association with the space programme."¹⁴ Although an overabundance of opinions exists about the true meaning behind *A Space Odyssey*, the film is unequivocal in its visualization of space travel. Majestic depictions of outer space, aimlessly drifting space stations, and the impact of technology offer sublimity through sheer magnificence and the solemn implications of our dependence on technology. With less than forty-five minutes of dialogue within a running time of more than two hours, the film is first and foremost a cinematic spectacle reliant on the viewer's personal interpretation of Kubrick's vision. After all, according to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, sublime experiences only occur in the mind.¹⁵ I experienced this personally when I first encountered Richardson's installation of *Mariner 9* (2012) at the Spanish City Dome in Whitley Bay, England, and briefly lost my breath as I was immediately transported outside of myself, and the day-to-day details and idiosyncrasies that follow me, directly to the surface of Mars. Over the past few years, Richardson has become increasingly interested in how science fiction presents us with opportunities to experience what life may be like in the future and, perhaps, on other planets. She is very much aware of the research around space exploration, which has become somewhat of a mini-obsession for her, and the continual shift in research on planet Mars is an exceptionally timely one. Corresponding with her growing concern with the state of our own planet Earth, Richardson feels that the search for signs of life there is integral to the conception of *Mariner 9* and our "priorities as a species." It is no longer a question of "if" we save the planet or "when" we can accommodate deep space travel, but more a calling into question "our current trajectory on the whole, given that scientific predictions for our future are quite terrifying."¹⁶

Although scientists are able to present us with data, or in some instances, mere conjecture, about what the future might be like, only artistic interpretations of these data and speculations are actually able to present us with a seemingly tangible connection to future worlds.¹⁷ *Mariner 9* is a large, panoramic video installation set two hundred years in the future. It depicts the planet Mars littered with the rusty remains of past rover missions to the planet and spacecraft debris that reads like a visual history of space exploration. While some of the crafts linger in the background as statuesque relics, others continue to go about their daily work but are hindered by their timeworn mechanics. NASA's space orbiter Mariner 9, from which the work takes its name, was launched from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in 1971 and was the first spacecraft to orbit another planet. Nearly six months later, it reached the surface of Mars. Others were to follow, such as the Viking 1 and 2 (1975), the first two spacecrafts to land on Mars successfully; Pathfinder (1997); Russia's Mars 2 (1971); and, most recently, the successful landing of the Curiosity rover (2012). Over the course of several months, Richardson studied the texture of Mars—soil, any evidence of water, terrain, and the atmosphere, taken from NASA access data from the planet—to try to form an accurate picture of what Mars may actually look and sound like. She purposefully began production of the work on the day Curiosity left planet Earth, November 26, 2011, and debuted it in Whitley Bay just three days prior to the craft's landing, August 3, 2012. In setting up specific parameters for initiating and completing the work's production, the mere premise of *Mariner 9* tasks Richardson with performance-based measures as well as a study in her own resolve and determination, given that she was told by several naysayers in the film industry that what she wanted to achieve was not possible, computationally speaking.

Begun a decade after Richardson's *A car stopped at a stop sign in the middle of nowhere, in front of a landscape*, through which she began to truly develop her craft as a video artist by collaging footage of real landscapes with found or digitally drawn elements, *Mariner 9* marks Richardson's liberation from her past practices. The Sublime she once sought in the landscape is now created, pixel by pixel, by her own hand.

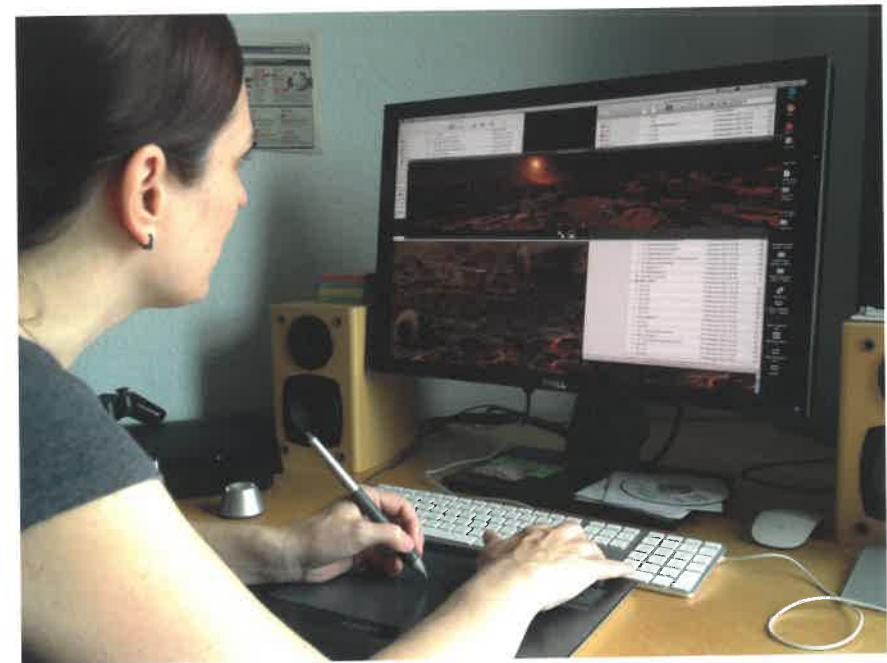


FIG. 10 : Kelly Richardson working in her studio on *Mariner 9*.

There is no preparatory photograph to be superimposed on; instead, each "stroke" (if you look closely, you can see them) has been created using scenery-generating software most often associated with the film and interactive gaming industries [FIG. 10]. Although the work's imagery is digitally made, its content is as true a representation of the surface of Mars as currently resides with any file, data, or photograph belonging to NASA. This is because Richardson studied extensively technical data¹⁸ from NASA's missions to Mars, transferring some of it into imagery-building software unfamiliar to Richardson, such as Terragen (to produce the landscape), Lightwave (employed by her partner Mark Jobe to produce the spacecrafts), and Turbulence FD (to create the dust storm). Once each file for the landscape's components was rendered, all of the elements were then composited within After Effects, a program Richardson had used previously. This incorporation of various programs culminates in a

shockingly meticulous and seemingly realistically rendered future vision of the red planet. While Richardson admits that every work she makes “usually requires learning a new program or an aspect of a program,” the most important part of her creative process is “facilitating ideas first”—a process that has her rethinking the landscape.¹⁹ Although she has traveled extensively to experience and film some of the most astonishing natural landscapes left on this planet, Richardson explains that the digital medium allows her to completely bypass logistical issues such as weather, the location of the sun, and general accessibility to these sites. Instead, she maintains that having full creative control over the landscape allows her to choose between creating a faithful representation or treating it differently to suggest another time, perhaps in the future and past our own existence.

Although *Mariner 9* is unquestionably a triumph for artists working in the digital fine arts, what is most striking is its faithfulness to the painterly Sublime. It first and foremost reads as a landscape painting. Despite the nuance of movement throughout the work and moments of sheer magic when dust kicks up and flitters across the surface, the work contains a luminosity that rivals paintings by some of the most masterful painters throughout art history. If Turner is known as the “painter of light,” Richardson is most certainly his contemporary counterpart, if not his kindred spirit. Moreover, despite the technology and sheer impeccability of her practice, over the course of several discussions about her work, Richardson always returned to the viewer’s experience and her desire to introduce those elements of science fiction film that bring to the foreground our collective uncertainties about the future. While her work centers on creating an experience grounded in the viewer’s curiosity in what future worlds might look like, her interest in experiencing these future worlds ultimately is about making explicit our current one. In his essay “Technology and the Environment,” Marshall McLuhan argues that we can never fully see and completely understand our current environment until another replaces it; the old agrarian world, for example, was made wholly visible by the new, industrialized landscape.²⁰ However, science fiction’s importance to Richardson lies in its ability “to present a vehicle through which we can experience what life might be like, as it allows us

to view our current environment (and within that, our priorities, which determine our future) with some measure of hindsight. Given current terrifying predictions for our future, there has never been a more important time to visualise where we are headed while there may still be time to alter the course.”²¹ The Sublime is a tool that collapses in on itself and allows viewers to unpack a work at their own pace. If, in two hundred years, progress has not been made on Mars, given that there is no evidence we will progress beyond curiosity, what will life be like on Earth? After all, fear is hope’s companion.

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HOLLY E. HUGHES

Holly E. Hughes is Curator for the Collection at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, where she is charged with researching and developing innovative presentations of the museum’s Fine Art Collection and overseeing collection-management initiatives. Recently she led the charge to establish a new exhibition space within the museum dedicated to the presentation of works in new media, which has since featured collection-based projects with artists Paul Pfeiffer, Pipilotti Rist, and William Kentridge, with upcoming installations by artists Marco Brambilla, Cliff Evans, Kota Ezawa, and Gillian Wearing. In 2011, she organized a major video-installation exhibition, Videosphere: A New Generation, the largest exhibition in new media from a single museum collection. Currently Hughes is formulating a series of major traveling collection-based exhibitions that will tour nationally and internationally, and is currently organizing a major exhibition with artists Eric and Heather ChanSchatz for 2014.

- ¹ The artist in conversation with the author, Newcastle, England, August 17, 2012.
- ² Longinus. *On the Sublime*. Translated by Andrew Lang. Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2008, pp.26–27.
- ³ Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2008, pp.40–41.
- ⁴ Thomas McEvilley. "Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart" (2001) in *The Sublime (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. Ed. Simon Morley. New York: MIT Press, 2010, pp.168–73.
- ⁵ Conversation with the author, August 17, 2012.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Jean-François Lyotard. "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime" (1982) in *The Sublime (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. Ed. Simon Morley. New York: MIT Press, 2010, pp.130–36.
- ⁸ The artist in an email message to the author, October 7, 2012.
- ⁹ Alan Nadel. "God's Law and the Wide Screen: The Ten Commandments as Cold War 'Epic,'" in *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995, p.91.
- ¹⁰ Pauline Kael quoted in Vivian Sobchack. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press: 2004, p.203.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Kelly Richardson. "The Return of the Apocalyptic Sublime." Master's Dissertation, Newcastle University, 2009.
- ¹³ Baruch Spinoza. *The Ethics*. Based on a translation by R. H. M. Elwes. John Fabian, ed. Commodius Vicus: 2010, 205. Epubfile.
- ¹⁴ Christine Cornea. *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007.
- ¹⁵ Immanuel Kant. *The Critique of Judgment*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Nicholas Walker, ed. Oxford University Press, 2007, pp.246–251.
- ¹⁶ The artist in an email message to the author, October 11, 2012.
- ¹⁷ The artist in conversation with the author, Newcastle, England, August 18, 2012.
- ¹⁸ The NASA data Richardson mined for *Mariner 9* are the MOLA (Mars Orbiter Laser Altimeter) data sets and can be found at <http://geo.pds.nasa.gov/missions/mgs/mola.html>. She was also in touch with the University of Arizona's HiRISE (High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment), who willingly shared their terrain files.
- ¹⁹ Email message to the author, October 11, 2012.
- ²⁰ Marshall McLuhan. "Technology and Environment" in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*. Ed. John O'Brien and Peter White. Singapore: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, pp.47–49.
- ²¹ Email message to the author, October 7, 2012.