

# UNFRIENDLY TAKEOVER

**David Weber-Krebs: “The consequence of infinite endings”**  
Lecture performance, Frankfurt, 17. 3. 2005

a co-production of PLATEAUX, new positions in international performing arts and Gasthuis Amsterdam.

*(The space is divided in two parts. The lecture space and the performance space.*

*The lecture space is divided in three: a slide projecting area, a pictures and video projecting screen and the speaking area, where I am seated at a small desk.*

*The performance space is lit throughout the lecture.*

*I start seated at a small desk.)*

10 years ago, I decided to go to visit a friend of mine in Munich. He was organizing a new music concert as part of a big exhibition of the abstract expressionist Ellsworth Kelly in the Haus der Kunst. At that time I didn't know much about New Music. So I was happy to have the opportunity to join the concert. It was in the biggest space of the Museum and it was a programme of about 6 different pieces. At the end of the fifth one, my friend addressed the assembly to tell them that the next piece would last for 45 minutes and that it would be very silent and that people were free to leave as they wished but that they would be kind to remain as silent as possible. It was a string quartet of Morton Feldman. When they started something that I had never experienced before happened. The space got silent not as part of the cultural consensus that consist in a respect of the live event that is offered, but each spectator actively silent, because the musicians were playing in such a low volume that it was not enough to remain silent, you had to do it actively in order to hear and to listen to the music that was coming out of these instruments.

This music was indeed located at the verge of silence, at the edge of its own death. It navigated in a sort of illusory repetition with an implicit tension between permanence and disappearance. This music was projecting sounds into time. And as some people were competing in silence with the musicians while leaving. Me and a few others we were making the experience of true beauty. It was as if it would never end but at the same time it was only busy ending, throughout the piece. And at last the silence that followed was truly sad,  
and profound  
and dark.

*(I stand up and go towards the slide projecting area. I start a first slide. It shows a photographic portrait of a young man, the polish artist Roman Opalka. In the second slide, it is the same man, but a little older. At the end of this slide show (30 slides), Opalka is an old man. I will perform this action a few times throughout the lecture. Dividing the amount of projected slides so that the last slide, where Opalka has reached an old age, corresponds with the end of the performance.*

*Facing the screen as a kind of mirror I give a lot of time in between the transitions. Each time Opalka is looking at me. Each time I am looking at Opalka.*

*Action performed with the first 7 slides.)*

A few years after that experience I got to know the idea of the Sublime and I immediately did relate it to that experience in the Haus der Kunst.

Theorists agree to place the Sublime not in the range of a production analysis, but from the point of view of the reception. The Sublime is an experience, a feeling that arises with the contact with certain works of art, but also in contact with wild overwhelming nature.

It has held artists and philosophers busy ever since antiquity and has, of course, lived a great deal of evolution throughout the ages. From the greek rhetorist Longinus to Burke, Kant, Schiller, Nietzsche and later Barnett Newman new theories and definitions are coming with new times and sensibilities.

However the most reliable characteristic is that of a mixed feeling. It is a compound of unease, expressed in the highest degree of terror, and joy, capable of intensifying to delight. It is a feeling where two antagonistic forces seem to come together in a glimpse opening a world of ambivalences. Ambivalences between immanence and transcendence, ambivalences between highest spiritual experiences and very secular preoccupations, ambivalences between the radical insensitive announce of our death and the sweet consolation of one or the other redemption. The XVIII century political thinker and philosopher Edmund Burke defines the Sublime as the third human emotion. There is fear and there is delight and when these two come together, we have the Sublime. There is no representation of the Sublime, nor can we grasp it with certitude. And only the one, who feels it, knows that he (or she) feels it.

The formal aspect of the art pieces that deal with the sublime is always absolute, reduced to a single point of attention that embraces the viewer in an authoritarian way. This, with the urge for an experience to take place that some could call spiritual and that leads the viewer towards a vertigo that brings him towards a resolution into the void. This experience is as fearful as it is wishful because it involves at the same time a separation from our actual state of being, from our loved ones, from life as we know it, from nature but it involves also the resolution into infinity and unity. It involves at the same time a process of mourning and a process of liberation.

*(A picture of Friedrich appears on screen.*

*I turn my seat towards it and watch the picture for a small moment, seated. People are now seeing the Friedrich picture “through” me. I stay there for a moment and turn back.)*

Let me give you a concrete explanation. When Petrarca climbs the mount Ventoux in 1336, it is the birth of a new sensibility. For the first time someone describes sheer overwhelming nature as a place to contemplate for its beauty and power. The hostile environment full of dangers which man had the mission to conquer becomes for Petrarca a place to look for symbols, a place for reflecting and longing. This represents the first step for the upcoming of what would be called the romantic spirit. This sensibility accessed to its full power in art with the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich where we see nature depicted as a place beyond empiric truth, a place where god seems to manifest his dying power through a dark and terrifying beauty. One or two lonely figures depicted from the back seem to have stopped their walk for a moment. They remain there, in silent contemplation, absorbed by the scenery. The compositions of these pictures is constructed in such a way, that these figures serve as filters for the viewer to be absorbed inside the paintings. They serve as guides to apprehend the representation of this landscape of death. The distance between us, who are watching the picture, and them who are placed inside the landscape, contemplating is uncertain. Are they barely helping us to look at the landscape? Or is it us that we see standing, lonely in these desolated environments? Our relationship with the reality of the painting becomes unsure, unstable. Is it empathy that we feel for these rather anonymous characters? Or are we already standing there, in this landscape?

*(A picture of Rothko appears on the screen.*

*I turn my seat towards it and watch the picture for a small moment, seated. People are now seeing the Rothko picture “through” me. I stay there for a moment and turn back.)*

The American abstract expressionist Mark Rothko got engaged in an artistic research that brought him to reach more and more towards the void on one side, and to paint larger and larger pictures on the other side. This double movement towards materiality and immateriality proceeded from the urge to create intimate and timeless pictures that “establish a communication on an exalted level of experience”. The art historian Robert Rosenblum refers to it as “abstract sublime” and states: “We ourselves are the monk before the sea, standing silently and contemplatively before these huge and soundless pictures as if we were looking at a sunset or a moonlight night.”

This experience is thus; to a certain extent, comparable to the experience of the contemplation of nature. Rothko himself stated that his paintings were no mere objects but “places”. This means, in a way, that we are not looking at these art pieces, but that we are entering into them. They are there, hanging on the wall of the museum, but they embrace us totally and we have no other choice than to stand there. Disarmed.

It is of course risky to compare experiences in nature and experiences with art, because after all, an art piece is always purposely establishing a communication and uses signs and Medias consequently. While art needs an ontological justification given by the receiver, nature simply is and doesn't exist by the means of its reception. But the important thing here is that there occurs a similar physical experience by perceiving these art pieces and by perceiving nature.

*(A picture showing me watching the original of "The monk before the sea, Friedrich" in the Nationalgalerie in Berlin appears on screen.*

*I turn my seat towards it and watch the picture for a small moment, seated. People are now seeing the Rothko picture "through" me. I start to talk from that position, commenting the picture.)*

We see here someone making the experience of the sublime. Someone, as Rosenblum puts it, *being the monk before the sea* while watching the picture The monk before the sea, 1745. And then, in turn, someone watching someone watching The monk before the sea and commenting the situation.

*(Back to frontal.)*

The experience of the Sublime, it seems, works through a complex game between getting absorbed or merging with the art piece, and keeping the distance towards it. And this, on a physical level as well as on a psychological and emotional level. It is a mechanism between resisting by the means of our critical distance and entering in an ever invading fascination. A mechanism that often leaves the perceiver with nothing but sweet sadness or unproductive melancholy.

Nature is not sublime as such, nor are there sublime art pieces or any other produced image that can be qualified as such. There are only artistic or communication strategies that lead to a sublime experience. And what remains is often a feeling of infinite sadness that we experience as beautiful. Diedrich Diederichsen in article about the Dutch artists Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij writes: "When we talk about this type of sadness it is almost always in reference to something fictitious, although it can also apply to something that has happened in reality but that we got reported to the media. The real infinitude is not in the misfortune itself, but in the distance between us and, our empathy and fellow-feeling, and the (fictitious or real) sufferer – it is this distance that appears infinite, because in fact it is absolutely unconquerable." (...) "The fact that we are here and they are there is in the end just beautiful."

The important thing here is that this "infinite sadness" seems to be inherent with the distance that exists between the perceiver and the image that he is looking at. These images are pleading for our help, they are asking us to take action, they are taking authority upon us, just in order to reject us and to make us feel even more the huge distance that exist between our aspirations of merging into unity, of abandoning our individuality, and our reality. It is this failure that we experience as  
Sad

and infinite  
and infinitely sadly beautiful.

*(I stand up and go towards the slide projecting area. Opalka action performed with 7 more slides.*

*Back to my seat)*

I would like to point out a small phenomenon that is repeatedly used in time based arts (performance, music, cinema). I would like to use it as an example for a manifestation of the Sublime in the culture of today with the possibilities of the moving image and the consensual sharing of time between the perceiver and an art piece or a performer. The pictures of Friedrich and Rothko are majestic. They impose themselves to the viewer. But the empty screen and the empty stage are, at first... empty. Waiting to be filled through time. The arts that have a development in time have quite another strategy and whole other possibilities. Through fiction or mere presence, they can prepare, manipulate the viewer by alternating images, by cutting, stretching or stopping our time awareness.

What I want to describe here is what I call *the phenomenon of disappearance* : a movement that slowly, irremediably heads towards its end. A movement of disappearance... and silence. This movement can take numerous forms: a slow fading out of light on a stage or a screen, the gradual disappearance of a form from very big to very small, until it becomes beyond our perception, an extensive progress towards immobility... And everything that happened before is forgotten for the means of that one movement. And the silence that follows breaks all ambivalences

Decisive  
Heavy  
Infinite

In the movie *Heaven* (2002) from the german director Tom Tyckwer we follow a man and a woman escaping. This escape from the violence of the state is not an escape towards a life together, it is an escape towards death together and, literally, a rise to heaven. Very early they know that there will be no escape in life. And when they get surrounded by the police, they manage to climb in a helicopter and to raise it into the air. But it is not in order to fly to another country where they could be free to live happily together. We see the helicopter flying vertically from the ground. And getting higher and higher and higher. And being smaller and smaller. Until it becomes no more than a mere black dot in the blue sky. A black dot that in turn becomes smaller and smaller. Until a point were it loses itself in the infinity of the sky. We think that we still perceive the sound of the motor. And then silence.

*(I turn my seat towards the screen and project the excerpt of "Heaven".*

*Back to frontal talking position.)*

The religious metaphor is obvious. But stronger than that metaphor which is an intellectual construct, is the emotional intensity of that moment. The helicopter will never stop vanishing. To our eyes, it will never stop ending.

It seems that the whole architecture of the movie was meant to prepare us for that moment. A moment where we don't follow the adventures of the two heroes anymore, but we are finally brought back to our own reality.

The heroes are gone.

We remain.

Powerless.

I would like to state that the works where that kind of phenomenon comes to happen constitute actually a long preparation for the viewer to perceive these moments to their full extension. These works are very often narratives where we follow the adventures of an individual or a group of people. We get attached to them and to their fate. We develop empathy for them. But when the movement of disappearance comes to start, we get absorbed in a vertigo that breaks with all the mechanisms instituted by the fiction that we follow. Something passes through us that we recognize. We experience there an idealized sweet version of our own ending. This is no fiction anymore. The experience becomes direct. We are entirely at its mercy.

To that extent, the one scene that crystallizes the whole movie *Nostalghia* of the Russian director Andrej Tarkovsky, is a very good example. The whole movie is a slow ending. The ending of a man who is incapable to adapt to a new environment and who is longing for his past and the place of this past, Russia. In this last scene filmed in one shot, we see this man playing a symbolic game that leads him to his death. His goal is to carry a lit candle from one end to the other end of an empty thermal baths installation. He walks with great care, protecting the fragile flame the best he can. Each time the flame gets extinguished by the wind, he has to start over from the beginning. We hear the breath of the man getting more and more difficult and it is clear to us that this is going to be his last achievement. This action is so simple, so understandable, delicate and therefore dangerous, and at the same time filmed with such a care, that we truly forget that we are watching a movie. It is as if it would happen here, in front of us, watching a performance. And then at a certain moment, out of care for the flame or because he needs to rest, the character breaks the rule: he gives a sign to the cameraman who is accompanying his steps. And the camera indeed stops its lateral traveling for a moment. The frontier between the dying character and the actor who is playing him disintegrates immediately. And we who witness this, we are suddenly truly brought back to the awareness, that this was no reality. And when, after a short moment, they go on, we have no other urge, than following the dying character again, no other urge than getting back inside the illusion from where we got expelled for a glimpse, no other urge than diving into the screen again.

*(I stand up and go towards the slide projecting area. Opalka action performed until the last one. )*

The ambivalence lies in the moment after. We are here, from now on alone. The last tune of the string quartet has vanished away and the musicians are packing their instruments. The hand of the choreographer and dancer Paz Rojo moving into the air in her last piece, *Basic Dance* has found her last immobility on the ground. The thing that we have followed, for which we had produced a certain feeling, a certain empathy is now gone. Lost in infinity. Preserved in the kingdom of transcendence. And the sadness that we feel might be that we haven't been able to follow it. The mourning might be that we are still here. Incapable of the elevation from which we just experienced a glimpse. The work just has absorbed us for a short moment inside itself. But it was to reject us as quickly as it sucked us in. The melancholy that we feel is that we have not been able to stay inside it, that of not having helped the carrier of the flame, that of not being able to hang to the helicopter in order to go to heaven together with the lovers. We are here, glued more than ever into the ground, paralyzed between an increased presence in the moment and the impossibility of transcendence.

*(I stand up and go towards the performing area. Excerpt of Basic Dance, from Paz Rojo.)*

*(Back to talking position.)*

I have described the phenomenon of vanishing or disappearing in the contemporary time based arts as a shifting mechanism from a fiction outside the perceiver to the own ontological reality of this perceiver. This mechanism holds a great deal of a manipulative strategy of authority on that perceiver. The art piece manages to hold him in his power and to influence him at its will.

This brings us back to the very birth of the idea of the Sublime. Indeed, the Sublime was born in a tradition that is not interested in art, but in the art of communication, of convincing, the rhetorics. With the *Treaty of the Sublime* the Greek Longinus (213-273), member of the neo-platonic school describes how an orator is due to construct his speech in order to arrive to a "sublime moment", where he would hold the entire assembly to his words, to a moment of excellence in the discourse, a moment of eternity and truth inherent in the discourse itself independently to logic or one or the other truth. A moment of pure authority on his audience.

Yes, at first, the Sublime did not deal with images but with the words of one person addressing a group of people. It didn't deal with sadness, or beauty or melancholy, but with authority.

So it is actually an interesting question to ask. Are we tonight placing ourselves right in the middle of this tradition? Me talking to you and you letting me talk?

Thank you for your attention.

*(End.)*

**Annexe: works** (is given to the spectators at the end of the lecture-performance)

ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **986391**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **1135672**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **2375195**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **2381233**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **2382351**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **2389771**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **3536277**

CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH, ***Two men by the sea at moonrise***,  
1817, oil on canvas,  
51x66 cm  
Nationalgalerie, Berlin

MARK ROTHKO, ***Untitled (Black on Gray)***,  
1969-1970, acrylic on canvas,  
203,8x175,6 cm  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York,  
Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc, 1986  
Estate no.X3.70

DAVID WEBER-KREBS,  
***Man being the monk before the sea in front of the Monk before the sea***,  
2004

ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **4369133**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **4398798**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **4513817**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **4681355**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **4695310**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **4853994**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **4893225**

TOM TYKWER, ***Heaven***,  
2002 (USA/D)  
Directing: Tom Tykwer  
Scenario: Krzysztof Kieslowski, Krzysztof Piesiewicz  
With Kate Blanchett, Giovanni Ribisi  
Duration: 1h36  
TF1 video, dvd

ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **5122577**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **5144289**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **5146225**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **5148991**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **5151003**  
ROMAN OPALKA: *Opalka* 1965/1-∞, **5155231**

PAZ ROJO, ***Basic Dance***  
Co-production Gasthuis (Netherlands), Kanuti Gildi Saal (Estonia)  
Premiere: 23 september 2004, Gasthuis  
With Paz Rojo, Cristian Duarte