Damien Hirst's shark: nature, capitalism and the sublime.


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**ABSTRACT**

Research Questions:

- How can we understand the relation between histories of the sublime and changing ideas of nature in the modern period? How can we understand these in turn as related to social change – in particular the growth of early-modern capitalism?
- How can we understand the forms of repetition and reiteration that characterise the history of modern culture?
- How might an investigation of the histories and aesthetic modes of the sublime shed light on the cultural imaginary of our historical moment of economic globalisation and ecological anxiety?

Research Context:

- There is a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature on the sublime, to which my larger body of research in this area has been contributing.
- This paper is a reworked and expanded version of a paper given at the symposium "The Contemporary Sublime," Tate Britain, 20 Feb 2010, focusing on the sublime in recent art. This was one of a series of symposia organised as part of the Tate’s AHRC-funded research project "The Sublime Object: Nature, Art and Landscape." (Part of the larger AHRC Landscape and Environment project.)

Research Methods:

- An interdisciplinary approach is used, synthesising insights from the histories of aesthetics, art, literature, film and popular culture, as well as economic and political history and histories of science and technology.
- A broadly Marxian framework of socio-cultural analysis is used but also interrogated.
- Though there is a focus on Damien Hirst, the paper makes close visual and textual analysis of a range of examples of representations of sharks from both high and popular culture, from the seventeenth century to the present, in order to draw out both patterns and differences.

Findings:

The figure of the monstrous shark is a distinctly modern one, linked to the growth of the aesthetic of the sublime and the re-envisioning of nature of which the sublime was a part. This re-envisioning is in turn linked to the growth of capitalist social relations in early modern culture – relations often figured (like the shark) in terms of the monstrous, terrible and predatory. Representations of the shark are insistently linked to the task of imagining capital, especially with regards to its colonial or imperial forms. They figure the social through nature and vice versa. This opens a reading of the shark in contemporary culture (in Hirst in particular) as a figure of ecological anxiety, but argues that these anxieties in turn are overcoded by their function in imagining globalised (neo)imperial relations.
on sharks and nature now. Damien Hirst’s Shark: Nature, Capitalism and the Sublime, by Luke White. The sheer volume of recent writings and academic conferences on the contemporary sublime suggest the subject is very much a matter of current concern [1]. But there is also a sense in which the sublime is not ever quite contemporary. To discuss the sublime now, we find ourselves inevitably tracing our way back to a historical discourse, to eighteenth-century thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant who theorised sublimity in its ‘classic’ form, or to nineteenth-century artists such as Caspar Luke White, “Damien Hirst’s Diamond Skull and the Capitalist Sublime,” as accepted for the publication The Sublime Now, eds. Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 155-171. The publishers’ website is http://www.c-s-p.org/ author’s contact: l.white@mdx.ac.uk lukewhite@mac.com. It is.

CHAPTER EIGHT DAMIEN HIRST’S DIAMOND SKULL AND THE CAPITALIST SUBLIME LUKE WHITE INTRODUCTION Writing about Damien Hirst is tricky: produced within and entirely accommodated to capital: it is made for purchase by an elite class of global capitalists—advertising gurus such as Charles Saatchi and hedge-fund billionaires such as Steve Cohen. Hirst, is this the same guy who created the butterfly exhibit that caused a great deal of controversy recently? It certainly seems like the same style. Reply. Despite the formaldehyde, it decayed. The formaldehyde, of course, is trying to maintain the intactness of the shark, and, perhaps, even its viciousness. This notion of its livingness. We fail.