

T.C.
BAHÇEŞEHİR UNIVERSITY
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THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

B. YAMANLAR

THE SUBLIME IN WATERSCAPES



PHD THESIS

BEGÜM YAMANLAR

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ABSTRACT

THE SUBLIME IN WATERSCAPES

Yamanlar, Begüm

Cinema and Media Research PhD Program

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The thesis explores the dynamic relationship between water and the sublime in contemporary art, positioning both as interconnected and fluid phenomena that exist in liminalities where boundaries dissolve between generation and negation, nature and technology, and reality and imagination. The research employs an interdisciplinary, fluid methodology reflecting water's elusiveness and transformation. Water as a central element, has captivated human imagination for centuries, inspiring artistic expression and philosophical inquiry. Its fluidity, immensity, and elusiveness evoke awe and astonishment, aligning with the sublime. The study reimagines water through the sublime, examining how changing understandings of nature and technology shape our perception of water as both a physical phenomenon and a metaphor for flux. It addresses key questions: What if we shift our perspective from 'being in the world' to 'being in flux'? How does water continue to evoke the sublime amid ecological and technological change? How do traditional representations of nature shift towards technological mediations reflecting the evolution of the sublime? Examining Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes*, Bill Viola's *Ascension*, and Anish Kapoor's *Descension*, the thesis explores how these artworks reconsider the sublime, presenting water as both a natural phenomenon and a liminal space for existential and ecological inquiry. These works expand the limits of their media, showing how contemporary art transforms

classical notions of the sublime, integrating technology and speculative perspectives. The study invites us to reimagine coexistence with the elements, and rethink water not just as a physical element, but as a metaphor for flux, transformation, and the never-ending cycle of becoming.

Keywords: Water, The Sublime, Liminality, Contemporary Art



ÖZET

SU MANZARALARINDA YÜCE

Yamanlar, Begüm

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Bu tez, çağdaş sanatta su ile yüce kavramı arasındaki dinamik ilişkiyi inceler. Hem suyun hem de yücenin, varoluş ile yok oluş, doğa ile teknoloji, gerçeklik ile hayal arasındaki sınırların çözüldüğü eşiklerde var olan dinamik ve akışkan fenomenler olduğunu savunur. Su, yüzyıllar boyunca hayal gücünü besleyen, sanatsal ve felsefi yaklaşımlara ilham veren temel bir element olarak, akışkanlığı, enginliği ve dönüştürücü doğasıyla heyecan ve dehşet hislerini uyandırarak yüce duygusunu derinden hissettirir. Bu tez, yüce deneyimi arzusunu temel alarak suya bakışımızın, doğanın değişen anlamları ve teknolojiyle nasıl evrildiğini inceler. Suyu yalnızca fiziksel bir fenomen olarak değil, aynı zamanda sürekli değişim ve akış halinde olan varoluşun bir metaforu olarak ele alır. Disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşım benimseyen bu araştırma, suyun ele avuca sığmaz ve dönüştürücü doğasını yansıtan akışkan bir metodoloji izler. ‘Dünyada olma’ halinden ‘akış içinde olmaya’ geçiş, algımızı nasıl değiştirir? Su, ekolojik ve teknolojik dönüşümler çağında yüce duygusunu nasıl uyandırmaya devam ediyor? Geleneksel doğa tasvirleri, teknolojik imkânlarla farklı mecralara taşındığında yüce deneyimi nasıl yeniden şekillenir? Tez, Hiroshi Sugimoto’nun *Seascapes* serisi, Bill Viola’nın *Ascension* adlı video yerleştirmesi ve Anish Kapoor’un *Descension* adlı enstalasyonu üzerinden bu sorulara yanıt arar. Bu

eserler suyu hem doğal bir fenomen hem de varoluşsal ve ekolojik bir eşik olarak konumlandırır. Çağdaş sanatın klasik yüce anlayışını nasıl dönüştürdüğünü ve teknolojik gelişmeler ile spekülatif yaklaşımlar doğrultusunda nasıl evrildiğini inceler. Bu çalışma, elementlerle kurduğumuz ortak varoluşu yeniden düşünmeye ve suyu yalnızca fiziksel ve doğal bir element olarak değil, aynı zamanda akışkanlık, dönüşüm ve oluş haliyle ilişkilendirilen bir metafor olarak ele almaya davet eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Su, Yüce, Eşik, Çağdaş Sanat



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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis explores the relationship between water and the sublime in contemporary art, investigating how evolving interpretations of the sublime intersect with water's inherent qualities such as its fluidity, immensity, and dynamism. It focuses on how these interconnected concepts have been shaped by evolving understandings of natural elements and technological advancements in philosophical inquiry, art and aesthetics. The choice of this topic comes from a personal and artistic fascination with water as a metaphor of flux and transformation, as well as a deep curiosity about its profound role in shaping our perception and existential relationships with the natural world. Personally, my artistic practice has often been drawn to water as a liminal space and a central subject of the sublime, inspiring this in-depth inquiry into its historical, aesthetic, and conceptual dimensions. Furthermore, the study of the sublimity of water is especially crucial in the contemporary era, as it provides a framework to reconsider ecological, philosophical, and artistic approaches in terms of environmental and technological shifts.

1.1 Central Argument and Research Questions

The main argument of the thesis is that both water and the sublime are dynamic and fluid phenomena that exist in liminalities, where boundaries dissolve between life and death, nature and technology, immanence and transcendence, reality, and speculation. By reconsidering water through the concept of sublime, the thesis aims to evoke an awareness of our bond with this primordial element not merely as a physical, material substance but as a metaphor for our existence as being in flux, always in the process of becoming. The study addresses key questions: How do the inherent qualities of water -its fluidity, immenseness, and transformative nature- evoke the sublime? How does contemporary art reflect the evolution and multiplicity of sublimities through different media and approaches? And most importantly how can these explorations deepen our reimagination of our bond with the elements, encouraging new understandings of coexistence and cohabitation with the elements and cosmos?

Nature is the horizon, the primal ground of all our possible inner and outer experiences. Throughout history, nature as the primal ground, and the four fundamental elements, -water, air, earth, and fire- as the barebones of existence had created an inevitable background, in both Eastern and Western understanding and imagination. In many of the manifestations of the relationship between nature and human, earth is defined as a material base, a generative maternal element for both human civilization and philosophical theories. Therefore, usually the elaboration of concepts became dependent on the stable, earth-bound grounds and reference points. This text puts water at the center as an elemental base that has captivated human imagination, given rise to various historical and philosophical approaches, and inspired artistic expression for centuries. Its inherent characteristics such as its fluidity, immenseness, dynamism, and transformative nature evoke profound feelings such as awe and astonishment, making it a central subject in exploration of the sublime. In an era when everything seemed to be in a state of becoming, it represents the flow of life in a way that the earth cannot. It questions what happens if we shift our perspective from considering 'being in the world' to 'being in flux' since we are living in a 'lifeworld' that is itself subject to constant flux. It follows the historical, philosophical, and artistic approaches that consider a crucial question: "What if we were to change the element within which we think and relinquish our parcels of conceptual ground in order to remain open to the element of water and its associated qualities of fluidity?" (Chiaroni, 2016, 108). Since more than 70% of Earth's water remain unmapped and unexplored, and due to its fluid nature, oscillating between generative and destructive, volatile and solid, reflective and absorptive, water emerges as a powerful metaphor for nature's unfathomable realms.

Water on earth "as an impenetrable and unknowable, a dark dead zone that trapped all that sank below the surface, never revealing its secrets" intensely evokes the aesthetic sensation of sublimity (National Endowment for the Humanities & Gillis, 2013).

Sublime here, in this text is identified mostly with being in a liminal state, reminding us of elusive boundary between life and death, and with being fragile in front of the immensity and dynamism of water. These are the constant elements of the sense of the sublime that still exist profoundly. However, nature loses its position of being one of a kind, the only power that stimulates the sublime with the developing

technologies that increasingly allow us to manipulate and domesticate certain aspects of nature. Technology's ability to manipulate and reconstruct nature becomes the newcomer that stimulates the contemporary sublime. In the context of art, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the traditional and common vessel that evoked visual sublimity was painting, but today, with the advancements in technology and the pervasive use of images in mass culture, the experience of sublime in art expands towards an edge in between different but related media. As the sublime occurs in a cognitive and experiential borderline, it is highly related to an art that can convey the impression of something transcending beyond categories and structures. Therefore, within the expanding and transcending boundaries of artworks, we can still trace the ambition of re-evoking the sense of sublimity that once existed only in the face of nature's vastness and greatness. However, it is not the mighty sea or storm-tossed waves that serve as subject-matter for contemporary sublimity of water in art, but it is the matrix of human, technology, and nature, which now serves as the bearer of the contemporary sublime. Since the sublime edge in artworks has been blunted, and pushed beyond the categories and structures, it is possible to claim that today's sublimity of water is expressed in the artworks that evoke both a sense of something natural and at the same time thoroughly technological and human made.

The text focuses on Hiroshi Sugimoto's photography series *Seascapes* (1980-), Bill Viola's video-art *Ascension* (2000), and Anish Kapoor's large-scale installation *Descension* (2014) as three canonical works that collectively offer reconsideration of the sublime, while presenting water as both a natural phenomenon and a liminal space for complex emotional, philosophical and ecological inquiries. Through diverse media and conceptual frameworks, Sugimoto, Viola, and Kapoor converge in challenging the boundaries of their respective media, perception, and representation. Since the sublime is a subjective and ever-evolving concept, choosing these particular works is both personal and deliberate. As an artist, I was profoundly influenced by these waterscapes that intersect in reconsideration of the sublime, embodying a dynamic interplay between presence and absence, nature and technology, immanence and transcendence, and reality and imagination. Building on water's inherent qualities –its fluidity, vastness, and dynamism– they evoke the sense of sublime both as an immediate presence and an ungraspable, transcendent power. As part of my own artistic journey and curiosity about reimagining water and the sublime in photography, video art and

installation; together, Sugimoto, Kapoor, and Viola's works allow me to explore the multi-dimensional approaches on the sublime, reflecting the complexities of our ecological, technological, and existential realities.

Regarding these, the text focuses on Hiroshi Sugimoto's photography series *Seascapes* that challenges the rational boundaries of photography with quasi-abstract immense sea depictions; Bill Viola's slow-motion video installation *Ascension* that achieves its sublimity through creating a slow-motion experience in an immersive space in between generation and negation. And subsequently it continues with Anish Kapoor's large-scale installation *Descension* that bridges the watery phenomena with technological engineering, transforming water into an immersive, dynamic, and unpredictable power. All the artworks selected create distinct viewer experiences, offering unique perspectives and positions for experiencing the sublime nature of water through immersive encounters and varied spatial relationships. The close examination of these three waterscapes materializes the contemporary sublime that still exists as a notion related with the immensity and mightiness of nature but in a thoroughly technological and human-made articulation. These works, while diverse in medium and perspective, intersect in their redefinition of the sublime as a fluid, liminal experience that bridges the natural and technological, the immediate and transcendent.

By challenging the boundaries of their respective media and reimagining the sublime in contemporary terms, these artists offer transformative reflections on our fragile relationship with water and the elemental forces of the world.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

By positioning water and the sublime in historical, philosophical, and ecological contexts while analysing them through contemporary art, the approach of the thesis is interdisciplinary. It connects multiple fields to explore the fluid and dynamic nature of these concepts. To achieve this, the second chapter of the thesis focuses on the philosophical dimensions of the sublime, tracing its evolution from classical to modern and contemporary theories. The first section explores the foundational theories of the sublime, especially on theories of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, whose ideas created a base for the sublime as a profound liminality in between awe and terror, alongside the limits of human comprehension. While Burke emphasises the sensory

and emotional aspects of the sublime, Kant explores the concept as a cognitive experience, rooted in the transcendence of reason in relation with nature. Building upon these foundational classic theories, the second section transitions into modern and contemporary theories, tracing the contributions of theorists like Jean-François Lyotard, Timothy Morton, and Simon Morley. These theorists reinterpret and expand the concept of the sublime, including its reconceptualization in a technologically mediated, ecologically fragile, and speculative contemporary era. Lyotard's focus on the unrepresentable, Morton's framing of hyperobjects and the speculative sublime, and Morley's account of the contemporary sublime as both immanent and transcendent creates a pathway for tracing the evolution of the sublime in the context of art. This chapter not only explores the philosophical inquiries of the sublime, but also traces it as a dynamic and ever-evolving concept that bridges historical, cultural, and technological contexts, providing a comprehensive perspective for reconsidering its enduring relevance and importance in contemporary thought and art.

The third chapter examines the historical, scientific, and cultural significance of water to understand how humans perceive it and how the sublime experience emerges at an experiential borderline. Water appears in numerous actual, symbolic, and metaphorical forms. The chapter begins by outlining water as an element, focusing on its inherent characteristics and its embodiment of an unfathomable, immense, and ungraspable zone that materializes the conditions of sublimity. The second section traces the role of water in the foundation of civilizations and its profound historical impacts. The third section reconsiders water's philosophical significance, focusing on how it has been perceived and understood in modern and contemporary contexts.

Taking a linear historical approach, the chapter explores water's cultural, religious, and spiritual significance, highlighting its fluidity, immensity, and dynamism as integral to its influence.

It begins with the ancient period, when water was not seen as a resource to be managed but as an integral part—and often the essence—of creation in both Eastern and Western cultures with the accounts of ancient Greek philosophers such as Thales, Empedocles and Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle, the key texts of Eastern philosophers such as Lao Tzu and Confucius and the mythological stories of Abrahamic religions. Throughout history and across every part of the world, water has always been a source of sublime power, sustainability, and influence. It carried multiple meanings within

religious and spiritual understandings and rituals. However, the evolution of modern civilizations, humanism, and the development of the scientific studies on nature, as a separate field from philosophy, mainly resulted with the domestication and control of water as a source of power for humanity. Within the last parts of the chapter, the significance and influence of water is addressed within modern philosophy. It begins with the period of Renaissance and continues through the Scientific Revolution which expanded into the Enlightenment, a time that isolated nature and the elements from their sublime, spiritual and religious understandings, positioning them instead as subjects of scientific investigations. It focuses on the transformation of water from an archaic element to a chemical compound (H₂O), redefined in modern times as a socially constructed resource—scarce and requiring technical management.

With the emergence of the phenomenological approach, the hierarchy between the observing subject and the objectified world is replaced by a relationship between the experiencing subject and the natural world, where all experience occurs. In the last section, the thesis explores modern and contemporary experiential and philosophical relationships with the elements and elemental phenomena, particularly water and watery phenomena. It examines the spatio-temporal experience of Edmund Husserl's "lifeworld," Martin Heidegger's unity of the fourfold, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh" as the element of Being, Edward Casey's elemental landscapes, and, most significantly, Gaston Bachelard's material imagination, as detailed profoundly in his series of books on the elements of earth, fire, air, and water.

It traces how the experience and appearance of the element water has affected our imagination and consideration of both the natural and sensuous world as a sublime entity. Water, either as the primordial womb from which life is born, either as clear or violent surface waters of the world, is an element that reveals its intrinsic and sublime values such as its ungraspable fluidity, immensity with unknowable depths and its impenetrable dynamism in the profoundness of imagination.

In imagining and dreaming of water, we see how water affects our imagination and understanding with its fluidity and reflectivity, as the natural mirror of nature that enables us and the world a kind of self-contemplation and a vision (Bachelard, 2006). With its fluidity, it becomes a metaphor of endless changes within the substance of being and becoming. "Water illustrates a kind of Heracliteanism, a philosophy of flux and flow" (Macauley, 2010, 296). Furthermore, as a natural symbol of purity, water

has a primordial and prominent place throughout history. Its purifying value is associated with regeneration and rebirth within the rituals of immersion to water. The immersion to water and then reemergence signifies the cycle in between death and rebirth in moral and spiritual senses. By exploring water -like the other primal elements- within an approach that intersects Pre-Socratic philosophy, phenomenology, and cultural ecology, Bachelard juxtaposes the material and imaginative, humane realms and unveils the interrelated and interdependent relation between nature and culture. Alongside his association between the material imagination of water with its fluid, immense and dynamic characteristics, he invites us to see by means of water. He examines the phenomenology and psychology of clear waters, running waters, deep and dead waters, nurturing water, pure water, violent water as he navigates between shallow surfaces and immense depths. In doing so, he establishes a profound influence for the next chapter, which explores the affinities between water and the sublime, emphasizing their shared capacity to embody dualities. Water finds its resemblance in sociological and philosophical theories in the post-modern and then contemporary era with its restless, transformative, and unstable form. It becomes a metaphor for celebrating the mixture of disciplines and perspectives which resist the stable, earthbound conventions that dominate language and stable structures within the accounts of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Zygmunt Bauman, Rosi Braidotti and Ivan Illich.

The fourth chapter examines the relationship between water and the sublime in visual art, emphasizing its significance and influence within art history and contemporary practice. Liminality, inherent in both water and the sublime, articulates threshold spaces and states between generation and negation, darkness and light, the visible and invisible, and volatile air and solid earth. Serving as a matrix for processes of becoming, water navigates these complementary dualities and enriches its impact on art and aesthetics. This exploration merges multiple disciplines, including philosophical inquiry, ecological and technological contexts, historical analysis, and media studies, to provide a comprehensive understanding of water's evolving significance in art.

Existing throughout all eras of art history and cultures, water carries multiple meanings and metaphors, preserving its relevance through diverse historical and textual sources. As Ivan Illich states: "The water we seek is the fluid that drenches the

inner and outer spaces of the imagination. More tangible than space, it is even more elusive. Because this water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors" (Illich, 1985, p. 24). With its fluid and formless nature that oscillates in a liminal state between being generative and negative, volatile, and solid, reflecting and absorbing, gently purifying and violently cleansing, water becomes a major metaphor for the sublimity of nature in paintings, photographs, video-arts and installations throughout the history of art. The chapter focuses especially on the transformation of experience of the sublime in contemporary waterscapes. Since the ambition of re-evoking the experience of the sublime transcends from traditional painting into an edge in between different but related media with the introduction of technology, it traces how the contemporary sublime occurs in artworks that transcend the limits of their own media. It explores how traditional depictions of water, often associated with the sublime, evolve in contemporary examples that not only use water as subject matter but also articulate the encounter with it by transcending the boundaries of their medium through developing technologies. This chapter examines three waterscapes from the twenty-first century, spanning a range of media—including a photo series, video art, and an immersive large-scale installation—by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Bill Viola, and Anish Kapoor, to highlight the ongoing and enduring significance of the sublime. The sublime, which was once related to the depictions of nature in the Romantic era, is now associated with being a threshold in between a sense of something natural but at the same time technological and human made. Focusing on these three artworks that challenge their own limits and situate water in this edge, illustrates the contemporary artistic responses to water within the expanding boundaries of sublimity. To explore the various aspects of the watery sublime in contemporary art, this chapter examines both the enduring and evolving characteristics of the sublime, reflecting how the objects and events that evoke this experience change over time. In the context of art, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the traditional and common vessel that evoked visual sublimity was painting, but today, with the introduction of technology and the use of images in mass culture, the feeling of sublimity migrates to immersive and large-scale installations and cyberspaces. Therefore, within the expanding and transcending boundaries of artworks, we can still trace the ambition of re-evoking the sense of sublimity that once existed in the face of nature's vastness and greatness. The desire to re-evoke natural sublimity endures in an age where the contemporary sense of nature's

sublime has been diminished by its despiritualization, humanity's unbalanced relationship with nature, and the domestication of elements like water, air, earth, and fire. This ongoing exploration of the sublime reflects that there still exists a persistent desire for the “heightened and perversely exalted feeling” which was once available only in front of the vastness and greatness of nature (Morley, 2010).

To delve deeper into this dynamic, in the analysis of the works by Sugimoto, Viola and Kapoor, the chapter draws on classical theories of the sublime such as Burke’s emphasis on terror and vastness of nature and Kant’s exploration of reason and imagination, to establish a historical and philosophical foundation. And it follows the modern and contemporary perspectives, including Lyotard’s notion of the unrepresentable, Morley’s view of the sublime as both immanent and transcendent, and Morton’s concept of hyperobjects. Tracing these perspectives reflects the shifting focus of the sublime from purely natural phenomena to experiences that involve the technological, speculative, and existential dimensions of contemporary life.

By analysing the works by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Bill Viola, and Anish Kapoor, the chapter illustrates the role of water in artistic expression, tracing its symbolic, elemental, and existential significance across historical and contemporary frameworks. And it explores how these waterscapes offer a reimagination of the sublime as a dynamic interplay between nature, technology, and speculative thought, reflecting the complexities of contemporary aesthetics and ecological awareness. These works deepen and transform the viewer’s experience of temporality and spatiality while questioning how the sublimity of water has expanded its boundaries, evolving from two-dimensional waterscapes to video art and large-scale installations that effects the viewer’s experience and create the illusion of immersion in the visual space of water.

1.3 Methodology

The thesis embraces an interdisciplinary approach that navigates the intersections of history, philosophy, and art studies to create a background and comprehensively explore the sublime essence of water in the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art. Therefore, I consider a broad range of literature from different disciplines to highlight the characteristics of water that materializes the conditions of

the sublime. Rooted in an interdisciplinary framework that embraces history, philosophy, ecology and art, the close readings of the three artworks unfold across various dimensions. Firstly, a formal analysis investigates each artwork by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Bill Viola, and Anish Kapoor, scrutinizing their artistic elements and techniques to examine how they contribute to the sublime effect. Simultaneously, a historical and biographical inspection is applied to understand how the social, cultural and personal experiences and perspectives of these artists influence the thematic and stylistic choices within their works. Intertwining with media studies, the exploration delves into how advancements in visual and engineering technologies shape the artist's capabilities to create immersive and transformative experiences, thereby expanding the traditional boundaries of natural sublime towards an edge in between human, nature and technology. The three artworks explore the watery sublime from three distinct perspectives—inside, below, and above a waterscape—offering a holistic approach that encompasses multi-perspectival encounters with water. Despite their distinct perspectives, the artworks share a common approach: they do not use water merely as a subject matter but instead create a magical effect that evokes both the natural immensity and dynamism of water while simultaneously presenting it as thoroughly mediated by technological and human interventions.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The existing literature on the relationship between water and the sublime in art includes a wide range of approaches, from classical interpretations of the sublime in nature to contemporary analyses that blends ecological, psychological, and technological dimensions. Notable studies explore water's transformative and metaphorical significance in art, as depicted in works by Turner and Friedrich, alongside more modern interpretations by Roni Horn, Olafur Eliasson and Bill Viola incorporating the themes of identity, transcendence, and the unrepresentable. However, these studies often focus either on water's historical role in evoking traditional notions of the sublime or its use in specific artistic approaches and media.

My thesis contributes to the field by reimagining the watery sublime through the context of contemporary art, focusing on its evolving, fluid, and multi-perspectival nature. By analysing the works by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Bill Viola, and Anish Kapoor

together, I explore how water and the sublime are dynamic and fluid phenomena that exist in liminalities, where boundaries dissolve between life and death, nature and technology, immanence and transcendence, reality, and speculation. Unlike previous studies that treat water primarily as a symbolic or aesthetic element, my research highlights its evolving role as both a natural phenomenon and a human-mediated construct, dissolving the boundaries between classical theories of the sublime and modern philosophical frameworks. This approach contributes to literature by offering a different understanding of how water continues to shape the sublime in art while reconsidering broader existential, ecological, and speculative concerns.

The research centralises the examination of water's inherent qualities –its fluidity, immenseness, and transformative nature—as a triggering element for evoking the sense of sublime by embodying dynamic interplays between generation and negation, the purifying and the violent, darkness and light, visible and invisible, volatile air and solid earth. These interplays reflect the broader argument of the thesis; that both water and the sublime are dynamic and fluid phenomena, inherently related to liminality where boundaries of life and death, nature and technology, immanence and transcendence, and reality and speculation dissolve. By investigating water through the concept of sublime, the thesis aims to create a pathway for reimagining our bond with water as a primordial element and the natural world.

Chapter 2

The Philosophy of the Sublime

2.1 Foundations of the Sublime: Classical Theories

Etymologically, the term sublime, which derives from the Latin word *sublimis*, a combination of *sub* (under, up to) and *limen* (lintel, threshold) means “tending to inspire awe because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility, or grandeur) or transcendent excellence”, alongside its definition of the change directly from the solid to the vapor state (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The roots of the term were primarily related to nature itself, but also with elevated quality in human endeavour and aesthetics. The first account of the term dates to the first century BC, to the treatise on literary criticism “*On the Sublime*”. (Longinus & Roberts, 2019). Although the author of the treatise is not definitely known, it is conventionally attributed to Longinus. Longinus introduces an analysis of the sublime as “a dual structure of being overwhelmed or overawed – as indicated by the Greek terms *thaumasion* (wonder, awe, admiration) and *ekplêxis* (astonishment, amazement, stupor) – coupled with the idea of being exalted or elevated” (Doran, 2015, 10). His conception of the sublime refers to a style of writing that elevates language and transcends the ordinary, evoking powerful emotional impact on the reader. According to Longinus, the sublime is achieved through five key sources as: great thoughts, strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified word arrangement (Leitch, 2001). The treatise focuses on aesthetics, mostly in relation to a strong and effective writing that elevates the reader's greatness in physical, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, artistic, and spiritual dimensions. For Longinus, a writer should be in search of arousing the readers with the sense of sublime, including a loss of rationality, an intense emotional engagement elevated with pleasure and exaltation, and a profound bond to the creative process. Longinus suggests that sublime literature has a transformative power to form and elevate the soul, allowing it to express itself within a work of art. Therefore, it is not a treatise on literary criticism but also as the expression of a noble and dignified soul (Longinus & Roberts, 2019). Since the text emphasizes the emotional, intellectual, and transcendental aspects of artistic expression, it is a foundational work that influenced many philosophers working on subsequent philosophical and aesthetic. During the

medieval period, due to the dominance of theological and religious considerations, the discussions on the sublime were overshadowed up until the rediscovery of the treatise. Its translations and publications in the 16th and 17th centuries reintroduced the concept to wider recognition across Europe. As a result, although the sublime is an ancient concept, it became mostly associated with the late 18th and 19th centuries. For the philosophers of the time, “the sublime provided a flexible semantic container for the murky new Romantic experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness and divinity that began to rupture the decorous confines of earlier aesthetic system” (Rosenblum, 1961, 39-40).

The term comes into vogue once again with Romanticism that clashes with the Enlightenment period and that regards nature in association with its violent, destructive, and terrorising effects alongside its tranquil, nurturing, and astonishing qualities. Before the eighteenth century, it was not so common to relate the concept of sublime to the objects of natural events, but rather it was commonly used to define the conversion of a substance from solid to a directly gaseous state without becoming liquid. It reemerges “as a way of discussing new kinds of experiences sought by Romantic artists and generated by evocations of extreme aspects of nature – mountains, oceans, deserts – which produced emotions in the audience of a decidedly irrational and excessive kind, emotions seemingly aimed at evicting the human mind from its secure residence inside the House of Reason and throwing it into a boundless situation that was often frightening” (Morley, 2010, 1). The rise of the sublime in Romanticism can be seen as an effort to restore a sense of wonder to a world “disenchanted” by the rise of scientific methods and enlightened reasoning. Weber defined this with a German term *Entzauberung*, often translated into English as “disenchantment,” though it means “de-magication. (Chua, n.d.)” Romanticism sought to counter this loss and mystery of the world by emphasising on nature’s unpredictability and awe-inspiring sides, emotion, and the irrational, particularly through searching for the sublime.

The sublime was not related to the static part of the natural world nor was part of an ecological tendency. It was rather a reaction to the secure and comforting rationalist point of view and was to awaken a new perspective of the changing universe. Edmund Burke in his treatise on aesthetics “*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*” (1757) highlights the term sublime again by arguing that

the sublime is the source of the strongest emotions which an individual's mind is capable of feeling.

“The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case, the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree” (Burke, 1757, 130).

He defines the sense of the sublime as if it inherently carries a dual nature or a liminality; the ideas of pain, danger, and terror on the one hand and the sense of astonishment and delightfulness on the other. Therefore, the Burkean sublime is highly related to being in between dualities, to the deep relationship with the fear of death, and to being vulnerable and small in front of the vastness and dynamism. However, for the occurrence of the sense of sublime there needs to be a critical distance to the danger. “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful” (Burke, 1757, 111).

Alongside Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel both question the sublime as a key element of aesthetics and build up their arguments within two different aesthetic frameworks.

“For Kant, the sublime is part of a larger theory of reflective judgment and hence captures a subjective phenomenon. For Hegel, the sublime is a part of a larger theory of world spirit being captured in external form and so also constitutes an objective phenomenon. The accounts thus differ at the metaphysical core: the sublime is subjective for Kant and objective for Hegel” (Lee, 2012, 43).

While Kant questions the sublime as a judgement of the rational subject and locates it in the individual's mind, Hegel investigates the sublime in a metaphysical way, he locates the sublime in a more objective world that is external to the subject, and internal to the Absolute spirit. For Hegel, sublime is the way in which the Absolute spirit, divinity reveals itself within the natural world (Hegel, 1835/ 1975). Although Kant and Hegel have distinct arguments on the nature of sublime, there are crucial similarities in their accounts since they both argue that nature is related to the sublime but not contained in nature as a sensuous form. The formlessness of the sublime is mutual in their accounts, nevertheless for Kant "the subject's mental disposition constitutes the sublime and for Hegel, the sublime is found in the negative relationship between finite nature and infinite Spirit" (Lee, 2012, 44). While both Kant and Hegel argue that sublime is not found in nature as a sensuous form, Burke claims that nature is the most sublime object that is capable of creating the most powerful sensations.

While Burke suggests that the experience of the sublime originated in the form of the sublime object, for Kant the sublime can also be found in a formless object; it is something that is "excessive for the imagination". Different from Burke he relates the sense of sublime with the imagination and mind rather than the object. Therefore, when Kant claims that nature is sublime, he means that our experience and the inadequate effort of imagining and estimating the magnitude of nature is sublime. He asserts that this effort "must lead the concept of nature to a supersensible substrate, a substrate that is large beyond any standard of sense" (Kant, 1987, 121).

"For although we found our own limitation when we considered the immensity of nature and the inadequacy of our ability to adopt a standard proportionate to estimating aesthetically the magnitude of nature's domain, yet we also found, in our power of reason, a different and non-sensible standard that has this infinity itself under it as a unit; and since in contrast to this standard everything in nature is small, we found in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity. Hence nature is here called sublime (*erhaben*) merely because it elevates (*erhebt*) our imagination, (making) it exhibits those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature" (Kant, 1987, pp. 120,121).

While Burke's argument of the sublime is organised around the sense of terror in relation to the terrible objects in nature that are able to give delight and astonishment at a certain distance, Kant judges nature as sublime not because it evokes the feeling of terror, but because of its ability to remind the mind its own sublimity and to elevate the imagination. Therefore, for Kant, the bond between sublimity and the vulnerability and smallness of human beings in front of the vastness and dynamism of nature becomes superseded by the superiority of the human mind. He locates the sublime in the mind's own superiority different from the Burkean sublime.

Kant distinguishes two sorts of sublime: the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. In the case of the experience of the mathematical sublime, the vast magnitude is associated with absolute largeness that is beyond every possible comparison. He formulates this as "the sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small" (Kant, 1978, 105). However, nothing in nature corresponds to this absolute largeness. When considered in a different relation; there is no object in nature however large it may be judged by us, that could not "be degraded all the way to the infinitely small, nor conversely anything so small that it could not, when compared with still smaller standards, be expanded for our imagination all the way to the magnitude of a world"; as the telescopic and microscopic images support these points (Kant, 1987, 106). Therefore, there is no object in nature that can be called sublime. "What happens is that our imagination strives to progress toward infinity" and "the sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense" (Kant, 1987, 106).

By this account of the sublime, Kant hierarchically distinguishes the subject that can think and imagine, from natural objects that prompt the consciousness for imagination, and he locates the sublime in the mind of the judging person. He asks;

"Indeed, who would want to call sublime such things as shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea? But the mind feels elevated in its own judgment of itself when it contemplates these without concern for their form and abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason that has come to be connected with it" (Kant, 1987, 113).

Contemplation of nature without concern for their form recalls the second kind of sublimity: the dynamically sublime. While in the mathematical sublime the vast magnitude is associated with the absolute largeness of the natural object as in the case of “shapeless mountain masses”, in the dynamic sublime it is associated with the encounter with nature as a power or might with its immensity as in the case of “boundless ocean heaved up” (Kant, 1987, 113). As in the case of the mathematical sublime, the dynamic sublime for Kant, occurs by the encounter of natural phenomena with our reason.

“Consider bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on” (Kant, 1987, 120).

The encounter with such natural phenomena that presents the powerfulness and mightiness of nature threatens our mere physical existence, however, when viewed from a critical distance, it calls our recognition that our reason is superior to and independent from nature itself. Therefore, he claims that the reason for judging mighty natural phenomena as sublime is not because nature arouses fear, but rather it calls our own strength and the power of reason with a different and supersensible standard of immensity and infinity. Nature is related to sublime because of its ability to elevate our imagination, allowing the mind to recognize its own sublimity, which transcends nature itself. (Kant, 1987).

Kant puts the sublime in the center of a unique and complicated experience of natural phenomena. However, the sublime in nature which makes our imagination and recognition strive to progress towards its own immensity, needs chaos and formlessness.

“..In what we usually call sublime in nature there is such an utter lack of anything leading to particular objective principles and to forms of nature conforming to them, that it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses our

ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation, provided it displays magnitude and might” (Kant, 1987, 100).

For Kant, the experience of sublime is not related only to the being on the edge of death, but also to the confrontation of human’s finite capacity to affirm itself rationally in front of a chaotic and terrifying phenomena.

As a result, in the Kantian sense, the term sublime was revived as a key concept that reflects the dualistic and incomprehensible core of experiences in nature in a way that overwhelms the mind but is also recontained by it. It occurs as an experience in between the vast, dynamic nature and the superiority of the human mind.

Kant’s emphasis on the superiority of the human mind and reason is deeply influenced by the Enlightenment period and its philosophical impacts. Therefore, his critique of pure reason and his thoughts on the aesthetic experience of the sublime are actually a part of a larger philosophical period, which tends to understand humanity and its relationship to nature through reason.

Since Kant’s perspective is based on the Enlightenment view, the Kantian sublime reinforces the power of Reason and affirms the subject’s autonomy and supremacy. His concept of sublime carries an effort to save the centered and unified subject in the face of a threatening natural event. But “What would happen if instead of struggling to preserve a unified and centered subjectivity, Kant let the subject fully participate in and transform through the body’s perceptual encounters with the world?” (Shurkus, 2013, 19) Gilles Deleuze, as one of the prominent figures of Post-Structuralist Philosophy, disintegrates the unified and centered subjectivity of Kant by allowing the catastrophe of the sublime encounter (Deleuze, 1980/ 2014). He focuses on questioning how the subject can undergo disintegration or breakdown without ceasing to exist. This profound questioning suggests a conception of the experiencing subject as in a process of change by its constant interaction with the world.

“It is not the sublime forces and forms of nature that can concern us alone, however, for as its theoreticians make clear, the sublime is not an ontology but a phenomenology, not a special essence of certain things but rather an experience of a particular kind, born out of the encounter between consciousness and the world” (Levine, 1985, 377). Therefore, for this view sublime occurs as an experiential phenomenon that arises from the encounter between human consciousness and the

world. Rather than an inherent quality of nature itself, it is a subjective response, an experience of awe and fear when the consciousness confronts something overwhelming and beyond comprehension. This way of looking does not locate the sublime in the external world or nature, but rather in between observer and the observed. This perspective aligns with the French philosopher Jean- François Lyotard's reinterpretation of the sublime that emphasizes it as an aesthetic experience in the encounter with the "unpresentable" or which cannot be fully grasped through language or imagery.

Lyotard associates the 18th century Enlightenment based thoughts of Kant about the sublime and the late 20th century postmodern critique of the grand narratives of modernity, knowledge, and representation. He interprets Kant's concept of sublime within the context of aesthetics, as something that is beyond representation, emphasising the boundaries of language and representational capacities of art. For Lyotard, the sublime occurs as an aesthetic experience in the encounter with the "unpresentable" or which cannot be fully grasped through language or imagery. This thought on sublime aligns with Kant's concept of sublime that it occurs in confrontation with the immense vastness or dynamic power that overwhelms our sensory capacities but also reflects the immensity of rational capacity. As he shifts his arguments on the sublime through the field of art and aesthetics, he criticises the modernist thought that is based on art's ability to represent reality, and favours postmodern thought that acknowledges and shows the failure of representation in art. And he associates sublime with the avant-garde in art, the focus is on the innovative and non-demonstrable with a profound attempt to present what has not been presented before (Lyotard, 1982).

"The pictorial avant-garde, as we have seen, responded to painting's "impossibility" by engaging in research centered around the question, "What is painting?" One after another, previous assumptions about the painter's practice were put on trial and debated. Tonality, linear perspective, the rendering of values, the frame, format, the supports, surface, medium, instrument, place of exhibition, and many other presuppositions were questioned plastically by the various avant-gardes" (Lyotard, 1982).

He asserts that the ‘modern painters’ realized that they had to represent what was non-demonstrable with the use of *costruzione legittima*- the mathematical technique to create linear perspective-. They revealed that the field of vision was not related only to the eye, but to the soul as well. This approach of the artists introduced a new kind of sublimity that is based on presenting the unrepresentable in the artwork. They challenged the consensus of a communal taste and traditional acknowledgement of beauty by creating artworks that are “monstrous”, “formless” and “negative”- these are the terms that Kant uses to define objects that gave rise to the experience of sublime (Lyotard, 1982). Therefore, the sublime of Lyotard is highly related to the question of “What is painting?” and the demonstration of the ungraspable and invisible in the realm of the visual. This approach to sublime resonates with the Kantian notion that the sublime occurs with the immense vastness and power that overwhelms our sensory capacity to comprehend it. However, Lyotard is significantly different from Kant by rejecting the modernist reliance on reason to transcend this sensory overwhelm. While Kant’s sublime elevates the power of human rationality to resolve the experience of the ungraspable and overwhelming, Lyotard critiques this resolution, instead embracing the "unrepresentable" as central to the sublime. Thus, while Lyotard’s sublime is rooted in Kant's sublime, it also departs from it by arguing that the sublime in postmodern art emerges from the recognition of the limits of representation. He criticizes the modernist understanding that is based on art’s ability to represent reality (Lyotard, 1982). Furthermore, he argues that the failure of representation allowed artists to present works that disorient our understanding, emphasizing the fragmented and incomplete nature of human perception. This positions the sublime as an experience that occurs in confrontation with something that resists being understood or contained, in contrast with Kant’s elevation of the unifying and rational resolutions.

Regarding the different interpretations on the sublime from the Romantic period through modern and postmodern art, it is obvious that the stimulus that triggers the sublime experience differs through time and space, however it appears as a concept that is timeless, universal and challenging for the limits of human ratio and representation. It serves as a powerful concept through which philosophers and artists question the boundaries of human consciousness and experience, the encounter with the ungraspable and unrepresentable in the realm of aesthetics. By its paradoxical and elusive nature, it still confounds reason and prevents any attempt to define it, and the

only chance to understand or grasp the sense of sublime, “lies in approaching the sublime as a possible human phenomenon” (Goble, 2013, 84). Since it is more than a philosophical concept; and it is a mere, genuine experience that coils reason with so many coexisting dualities, its meaning is unique within each encounter between consciousness and the world.

2.2 The Sublime in Modern and Contemporary Thought

From antiquity, the history of the sublime, refers to a possible human psychology for astonishment. The triggering object of the feeling of sublime and its interpretation varies from one epoch to another, from one culture to another and from one discipline to another. As to sum up from a historical perspective, from The Enlightenment philosophers such as Edmund Burke to Immanuel Kant and to later philosophers and critics, nature as the crucial and external object that stimulates sublime feelings, became deemphasized with the increased importance of perception of the subject. Burke shifted the focus towards the perception and experience of the subject as the beholder of the sublime. After Burke, with Kant the sublime goes beyond the physical and perceptual limitations of the subject with the emphasis of spiritual transcendence. Then, as a canonical approach, Lyotard reinterprets Kantian sublime as an aesthetic experience in the encounter with the “unpresentable”.

The encounter with the natural scapes, especially with waterscapes, was one of the most influential confrontations that stimulates the feeling of sublime due to nature's being as a liminal space in between life and death. Since nature reminds us of the elusive and unfamiliar line in between life and death, and transcend the limits of rationality, it states itself as ‘other’ for the predictability and familiarity of the mundane life. It stands in contrast to the predictability and familiarity of human life by forcing humans to confront the boundaries between life and death, the familiar and unfamiliar. As the ‘other’ it breaks the stability with its wild, untamed, and uncontrollable parts. Whether as a vastness of a mountain or as a sudden vortex in the ocean, it reminds us that we’re part of something larger and mysterious. It shifts our anthropocentric view of the world. Thus, it forces us to transcend the mundane and the predictable as an encounter with the sublime ‘other’.

Sublime, by its elusive nature, is inherently linked to a great and unpredictable power of nature. Therefore, it challenges the understanding of nature of humanists and the Enlightenment philosophers that approach nature as a source that is to be studied, observed and controlled.

Since the sublime is inherently based on a powerful core, humanists and Enlightenment philosophers who were seeking progress often saw it as a challenge. Alternatively, as Kant did, they located the sublime into a framework that elevated reason, attributing sublimity to humanity itself.

Although the notion of sublime is predominantly associated with the profound depthness and vastness of nature and the transcendence of the limits of reason, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the experience of the sublime became re-introduced in association with technology.

“This transformation is closely connected with two major developments in Western society: the secularization and disenchantment of nature, and the spectacular growth of the natural sciences and technology. Nature increasingly becomes the object of technical control” (de Mul, 2012, 17).

David Nye in his *American Technological Sublime* (1984) asserts that technology in America, -from dams to canals, from bridges to industrial architectures- provoked a sense of sublime similar to the encounter with the vast natural landscapes (Nye, 1994). The technological sublime differentiates itself from the concept of the natural sublime. The technological sublime is grasped generally in vast human made structures such as the Hoover Dam, which is a “spectacle in the midst of emptiness and desolation” as the author Joseph Stevens notes “first provokes fear, then wonderment, and finally a sense of awe and pride in man’s skill in bending the forces of nature to his purpose” (Stevens, 1988, 140). Within this encounter it occurs as an experience of awe and terror that reflects human power and ratio; however, it carries the traces of the uncontrollable power of technological progress, which might go beyond human power. Within the contemporary world, technological sublime is an integral part of an increasingly desacralized public life. It “represents a way to reinvest the landscape and the work of men with transcendent significance” (Nye, 1994, xiii). However, the technological sublime is not a constant phenomenon, since the

transcendent significance of the technological sublime does not come from the technological object *per se*, but rather from the continuous and never-ending reformation of the sense of sublime.

Another important and critical aspect of the technological sublime by Vincent Mosco is explored in *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (2004). The digital sublime often refers to the sense of awe and astonishment related to the idealised possibilities of digital technologies, the internet and cyberspace with an utopian/dystopian belief that digital technologies will transcend traditional socio-political and economic problems of the previous formations. Mosco, from a critical point of view, explores the relationship between constructed social myths, digital technology, and cyberspace as an elevation of digital technology to the level of the sublime. However, his understanding of digital sublime is much more critical and skeptic in the sense that it is not just a technological breakthrough that transcends the limitations of humans but also an expectation of people for a genuine transcendence and a radical change (Mosco, 2004). He critically asserts that this digital sublime is a mythic narrative of an era constituted of advanced digital and information technologies, just like the previous era's grand narratives and myths that failed. For sure it has an alluring and awe-inspiring side, cyberspaces, digital information technologies, the internet, and digital media with their ephemeral and omnipresent qualities. However, as Mosco mentions it is far from its idealized, alluring version as it is something that operates still with capitalism and without the recognition of equality, ethical and moral limits and environmental sustainability.

As once nature became the 'sublime' other for societies, digital and technological advancements that transcend the mundane and predictable shares nature's sublime otherness. Just like the natural phenomena with its scale and complexity it overwhelms human perception through its distribution in time and space. Both natural and technological formations are often too vast to grasp and fully comprehend in a way that evokes both awe and fear. They both have a potential for generation and catastrophe. In an era where the boundaries between nature and technology are intertwined and transcend the comprehension and power of human, we need to rethink and reevaluate the relationship between human, nature and technology holistically. Since the technological sublime that is tied to human domination and advancement over nature and natural elements, it comes with it costs as the

despiritualisation of nature and ecological degradation in a way revealing the limits of human control. By thinking together the natural and technological sublime, the need for a sustainable development that respects both the natural world and technological advancement becomes more crucial. In this problematic, blurry and liminal field, interconnectedness and the need to move beyond thinking of human, nature and technology are seen as separate entities. Hyperobjects of Timothy Morton reminds and encourages us to rethink how we relate to nature and other non-human objects and events holistically.

As a member of the Object-Oriented Ontology movement, Timothy Morton focuses on a more contemporary and both technology and ecology related view on the sublime. He intertwines arguments on the sublime and hyperobjects with his exploration of Object-Oriented Ontology. The hyperobjects as defined by Morton, are objects that are massively distributed in time and space such as global warming, ecological transformations, the internet and nuclear radiation (Morton, 2020). Since we are at a crucial point in the history of humans, in an age of ecological crisis, hyperobjects become visible to humans with their qualities that make them uncanny and overwhelming. He argues that the current ecological transformations urge us to rethink the sublime as a concept that is traditionally tied up to the human-centered experiences of awe and terror. Since they are non-local but rather spread out, inescapable and exist on scales of time that are beyond human lifespan that make them difficult to grasp. Therefore, their vastness and complexity make them aligned with the concept of the sublime in ways that transcend our ordinary perception. His approach challenges the anthropocentric focus of traditional aesthetics. He extends the sublime within the realm of hyperobjects and criticizes Kant's conception of sublime from a speculative realist perspective. Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* argues that when we experience the sublime, we should avoid interpretation and analysis through scientific or practical knowledge:

“.. when we judge the sight of the ocean we must not do so on the basis of how we think, it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge which we possess (but which is not contained in the direct intuition), e.g., as a vast realm of aquatic creatures, or as the great reservoir supplying the water for the vapors that impregnate the air with clouds for the benefit of the land..for all such

judgments will be teleological. Instead we must be able to view the ocean as poets do, merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye—e.g., if we observe it while it is calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky; or, if it turbulent, as being like an abyss threatening to engulf everything—and yet we find it sublime.” (Kant, 1790, 130)

While for Kant the sublime experience is direct, immediate and emotional reaction that elevates mind into a state of being overwhelmed by the greatness of nature and elevates the mind into its own ungraspability, the speculative realist point of view of Morton claims that we should not limit the sublime to an immediate aesthetic and sensory impression. Morton suggests a more speculative or object-oriented sublime which has its roots from the Longinian sublime which is “interested in how to achieve the effect of sublimity rhetorically than what the sublime is as a human experience. It leaves us free to extrapolate all kinds of sublime events between all kinds of entities (Morton, 2020, 220). This OOO perspective is concerned with the presence of an uncanny and alien world that is beyond direct human sensory experience and perception. It suggests a deeper and unsettling way of thinking about the sublimity of the vastness and complexity of the universe, the ungraspable nature of the ocean. Here, speculation enriches the sublime through thinking deeper about the unsettling truths beneath the aesthetic sublime of Kant. It questions the immediate and direct experience of sublime through intellectually engaging with the sublime and its underlying realities that evoke awe and astonishment.

“Snowflakes glitter in the light that cruelly annihilates them; damaged submarines rust along the ocean floor. As lours emerges from mills and blocks of limestone are compressed by earthquakes, gigantic mushrooms spread in the Michigan forest. While human philosophers bludgeon each other over the very possibility of ‘access’ to the world, sharks bludgeon tuna fish and icebergs smash into coastlines” (Graham, 2010, 93).

This is a world that is alien to us, just as 70 percent of the ocean, which is alien, unknown and mysterious to us. Without experiencing aesthetically as a sensory experience just to think and speculate about the vast, mysterious, more-than life-span

time periods and spaces on earth and beneath the ocean trigger the sublime in this scenario. Then what about expanding the limits of the sublime from the boundaries of immediate and direct experience with nature or objects in the Burkean sense? What if we consider nature and its elements without a human-centered perspective, especially in relation to the Kantian idea of the sublime? What if we adopt a broader and more fluid ecological perspective that encompasses vast transformations extending beyond human lifespans?

With the speculative realist perspective that questions the ties between the immediate experience and the sublime, water can be understood not only as a physical substance that humans encounter directly. Therefore, it does not only invoke sublime in the Burkean and Kantian notion, but also as a hyperobject with its vastness, ungraspability and omnipresence that transcends the aesthetic human experience and exists independently of the human-centered world. Alongside the understanding of water as a hyperobject it also has a unique position in the realm of technological sublime. With the modern technologies that make humans able to manipulate water through dams, canals, desalination technologies and its technological representations in contemporary art, the boundaries between the natural and technological sublime become blurred. Therefore, the relationship between water and sublime occurs in multiple levels as the natural sublime of Romantics, as an element that invokes technological sublime, and as a hyperobject that exceeds the human lifespan and place resonating with the speculative sublime. This shift from a human-centered view to the decentralization of humans in the concept of sublime, might create a new perspective for understanding the relationship between water, technology, art and the sublime.

I situate water as a crucial medium through which to explore the sublime, intensifying and enriching its conceptual depthness and fluidity. This framing highlights how water aligns with the sublime as both a material entity and a metaphor that navigates and shifts the thresholds between the actual and the speculative, the immanent and the transcendent. Regarding all these philosophical inquiries, my understanding and exploration of the sublime involves a multi-perspectival approach as it follows the interplay between classical and contemporary perspectives that emphasize its fluidity, subjectivity, and evolution through time. From classical theories, I was mainly influenced by Burke's emotional and sensory aspects of the sublime where terror and beauty coexist, and Kant's sublime that recognizes it as an

experience triggered by the overwhelming vastness and dynamism of nature, elevating the mind to a heightened awareness of human reason. However, these classical theories are limited in their ability to fully cover the understanding of the contemporary conditions shaped by technology and its derivatives, which have fundamentally altered our perception of nature, time and space. Therefore, my exploration expands beyond these classical frameworks, including Lyotard's critical view of the sublime as a disorienting confrontation with the unrepresentable, challenging the boundaries of representation and the unified and elevated comprehension. Additionally, inspired by OOO's speculative realism and Morton's concept of hyperobjects, I find it crucial to explore the sublime also as an encounter with vast, interconnected, alien and temporally ungraspable entities that are beyond the immediate human perception. I approach the sublime as a dynamic and evolving concept, that inherently and etymologically exists within liminalities between the natural and the technological, immanence and transcendence, and the actual and speculative. This multi-perspectival view positions the sublime as a reflective and transformative concept, deeply connected to both existential and ecological awareness.

To further contextualize the relationship between water and sublime, the next chapter will explore its historical and philosophical aspect in a broader sense. It will trace the evolution of water both as a physical and symbolic power and will examine how it has been perceived and experienced in philosophical and historical traditions, from its ancient symbolic aspects to its crucial role in contemporary ecological and philosophical understanding.

Chapter 3

Water in Philosophy

3.1 Water as a Sublime Element: Exploring the Unfathomable

Throughout the centuries, water mostly as sea or ocean, evokes the sense of sublime whether in relation with Kantian terms such as incomprehensibility, vastness of magnitude and nature, with Burkean terms such as astonishment and terror, or with Morton's terms such as a speculative one outside the human-centered world. Dualities such as awe and admiration, astonishment and fear converge in relation to the experience of sublimity of water. Water that creates a liminal landscape by essence between solidity and volatility, darkness and lightness, depthness and shallowness, its ability to purify gently and cleanse violently, to generate and negate, functions as a metaphor of the sublimity of nature as a whole. Furthermore, its fluidity and ungraspability are the powerful characteristics of water that defies static understanding and become aligned with the sublime, which challenges the limits of rational comprehension.

Alongside its constant movement and its ability to transition between its three different states, water always remains as water as if it is always the same. However, regardless of still remaining as water, it inherently creates a liminality by providing a matrix for the processes of becoming in between these complementary dualities.

Water as an element transcends scientific norms, embodying a sublime essence that goes beyond conventional understanding. The element water is the sole natural substance that can exist in three states -solid, gas, liquid-, defying typical chemistry rules. It is the universal solvent that dissolves more substances than any other liquid, traps all that sank below the surface, and carries them as a time-capsule of the earth. From its seventy anomalies, two of them; its enigmatic dynamics of density and its ability to dissolve a myriad of substances, create a foundation for the very possibility of the existence of life. Unlike other elements, water's anomalies become the conduits for life. As an element being transformed in its three states in a never-ending liminality between the solid earth and the volatile air, is unusual in that its solid form, ice, is less dense than its liquid form, which enables ice to float on water. Since ice floats on water, it generates life both on its surface and depths. Since it can float upwards against

gravity, it also makes it possible for oxygen and other nutrients to reach the brain. This anomaly enables life both inside the body and outside on earth. Although it exists in three states, the name water typically refers to the liquid state of the element. The liquidity of water refers generally to its fluidity that connotes a formlessness, capability of flow and transformation. Alongside its fluid transition between its three states that symbolizes the boundless potential of nature's forces that are beyond human control, its liquidity and ability to flow elusively, aligns with the sublime through its association with the dynamic and ever-transforming, ungraspable aspects of nature. Beyond its scientific attributes, water's fluidity with its dynamic force, and its ever-changing, uncontrollable, and boundless characteristics evokes the sense of sublime. It recalls the emphasis on the ungraspable and elusive qualities of the natural world that transcend the rational boundaries of comprehension.

Furthermore, the latter anomaly of water being the universal solvent, dissolving more substances than any other liquid, resonates with the sublime as it becomes a symbol of constant reformation and circulation, existing for billions of years. This perpetual cycle mirrors the sublime spatio-temporal transcendence of water that exceeds the comprehensible, controllable limitations to nature. This unique feature also mirrors its sublimity as it both accommodates and annihilates the substances it dissolves. This process establishes a dynamic interplay that simultaneously embraces and negates the presence of other substances. Water's dissolution process generates a sense of awe and wonder, akin to the sublime experience, as this interplay blurs the boundaries between creation and annihilation. It invites contemplation on the profound mysteries encapsulated within the unfathomable elemental realm of water.

3.2 Elemental Reflections: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives on Water

From the four main elements, water is crucially powerful in both Eastern and Western philosophy, literature, and geography alongside scientific research. From Pre-Socratic to Post-Structuralist philosophers, throughout the history of civilization, water undergoes continuous reconsideration serving not only as a foundation but also as a metaphor that resonates across diverse cultural and intellectual fields. Its essence is explored and contemplated as a source of both elemental basis and metaphorical depth. The ways in which it is perceived, valued, worshipped, and managed vary within the

changing tides of human experience and its historical contexts. However, the evolution of scientific studies on nature, beginning from the Renaissance, followed by the Scientific Revolution which spanned The Enlightenment, isolated nature and the elements from their sublime, spiritual and religious understandings and turned them into objects of scientific investigations. Water has transformed from being understood as an archaic element to a chemical compound as H_2O as a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and that calls for technical management. Water, once a subject of philosophical contemplation, became increasingly framed within the realm of science. The sublime, traditionally associated with the mysterious and awe-inspiring aspects of nature, took on a new dimension as scientific knowledge sought to understand and control the natural forces. This shift reflected a broader cultural change wherein nature moved from the realm of philosophy to that of scientific investigation. This shift also profoundly altered the perception of the sublime. Since it was traditionally associated with the unknown, mysterious, and overwhelming aspects of nature, the sublime is shifted towards an edge in between the power of nature, humanity's intervention and attempts to control and rationalize natural elements and forces. As scientific knowledge increased and domesticated the natural elements, the sublime evolved from being solely rooted in nature to exist at the intersection of the natural, technological and the human made. This shift reflected a broader cultural change regarding the changing the perception of natural elements, reframed by the "disenchantment" of nature and technological mediation.

This chapter briefly delves into the historical and philosophical significance of water, tracing its dual role as both a natural force and a cultural symbol. It examines water's profound influence throughout history, functioning not only as a powerful natural element but also as a source of inspiration and metaphorical depthness in philosophical inquiries. It examines how water existed as a source and metaphor for life, transformation, and the unknown. By exploring water's historical pathway and the ways in which humans have encountered and conceptualized it, the chapter reflects how water's evolving significance aligns with the evolution of the sublime.

3.2.1 Elemental origins: water in early history and thought. From the very beginning of civilizations water was a vital source with all its religious, biological, political and economic values. The earliest known civilization was developed in

Mesopotamia around 4000 BC. The name Mesopotamia (*khora*) is formed of two ancient Greek words; *mesos* meaning middle and *potamos* meaning river. It refers to the country between two rivers; Euphrates and Tigris. It is not a coincidence that the first civilization was formed near water sources. The regular river floods allowing fertilisation of the soil and provided fresh water for plant irrigation and cultivation, resulted in the formation of the first cities and states in Mesopotamia. (Hritz & Wilkinson, 2006). The term *khora* also carries deeper philosophical significance, as it later appears in Plato's *Timaeus* as a formless, liminal space that exists as a receptacle for becoming, a site where transformation unfolds. This dual significance of *khora* as both a literal and metaphorical space highlights the centrality of water in providing not only the physical conditions of life but also the conceptual frameworks of transformation and liminality (Plato, 360 B.C.E./2000).

At around 3100 BC, as the precursor of Mediterranean civilizations, Egyptian civilization emerged in the fertile Nile River delta which is surrounded by vast deserts. Similar to the Mesopotamian civilizations, the floods of water of the Nile River both enabled and annihilated life on the drylands of Egypt. Therefore, they developed dams, canals, and irrigation systems in order to control Nile's floods and carry water to distant farms and villages. Furthermore, they regulated their lives according to the flood cycle of the life-giving Nile River and they invented one of the first known calendars which later paired with the solar and lunar cycle. "Nature divided his year into three well-defined seasons-Flood, Spring, and Low Water or Harvest, with the Flood Season, following the hardship of the Low Nile, the obvious starting point for each annual cycle" (Winlock, 1940, 447).

Water was not only essential for soil fertility and plant irrigation but also had a sacred significance in Egyptian civilization and mythology. The cyclical movements of water and the sun were seen as evidence of the universe's cyclical nature. Connecting with and partially grasping the sheer scale of the cycle of nature reminds us of the delicate balance between nature, human and the environmental consequences. The Nile, with its ever-evolving flow, regeneration, and tidal movements, reflects the immensity and interconnectedness of water's never-ending cycle, fitting Morton's criteria for a hyperobject that is beyond the immediate human comprehension. The cyclical movements of the Nile evoke a timelessness and a profound resonance on the

infinite cycle of nature's essence as becoming. Through the Nile, the transformative power of water becomes both a material force and a metaphor of the sublime.

Parallel to Mediterranean and Egyptian civilizations, water has a crucial role in Chinese, Indus Persian, and Roman civilizations both as a material and a metaphor. Indus Valley (Harappan) civilisation, which began its urbanization period at around 3300 BC near Indus River, developed far more advanced individual wastewater drainage and water supply systems. Therefore, they maintained the first known sanitation system that enabled them to sustain and endure. Chinese civilization that grew up near Yellow river at around 2100 BC, developed low and high dams systems that enabled them to survive for long periods as an agrarian society. Ancient Persia, which was one of the earliest inhabited regions, 3000 years ago developed the first qanat (*kariz*) system (underground aqueduct) which enables the movement of water to Iran's deserted regions from kilometers away. It paved the way for the aqueduct system of Rome which created the roots of today's water management tools.

Roman civilization which endured for over 1000 years, started as a small village near Tiber River around 8th century BC in Italy. As the ability of adaptation and domination of civilization survived over 1000 years, they expanded their territories from north Atlantic to Persian Gulf. Since the amount of fresh water was not adequate for the intensely increasing population in Roman cities, they developed the aqueduct system that makes water flow from the single natural source to the distribution points far away. This development made the Roman public able to access water, improved the conditions of sanitation and led to other aquatic innovations which are still in use today, such as the underground sewage system, settling tanks, public baths, and toilets.

Unlike the earlier civilizations which developed close to water lands as Mesopotamia and Egypt, ancient Greek civilization centered mostly in dry areas or in the middle of water, in the islands. From the Minoan period (2700 BC-1500 BC) in which some of the earliest hydraulic systems are developed to the Hellenistic period (323 BC- 31 BC) they developed wells and cisterns for rainwater collection, advanced sewage systems, systems for flood control and energy utilization, dams, draining systems, watermills, pipelines with pressurized flow of water as some of the earliest examples of water supply systems in ancient period (Koutsoyiannis & Patrikiou, 2014). Alongside the improvements of water supply technologies, the thoughts and

theories of the ancient Greek philosophers which were influenced mainly by nature and water dynamics were more crucial throughout the history.

Water had always had a dual significance in the development of civilisations, both as an essential element for survival and sustainability and as an unpredictable power that inspires awe and fear. The existence of water has always been crucial for agriculture, transportation, and technological developments, incorporating sophisticated systems such as irrigation canals, dams and aqueducts to domesticate its flow and unpredictability. However, despite these developments, its unfathomable nature with floods, droughts, and sheer immensity, it reminded humans of its untamed and elusive power. This duality highlights water's liminal state, as both life-sustaining and life-threatening, as a source to be controlled and as a symbol of unpredictability, reflecting the broader tension between human and nature. This duality establishes a foundation for exploring how water's symbolic and practical significance has affected human thought across cultures.

The influential aspect of water goes back to the beliefs of indigenous societies but predominantly beginning from ancient Greek and Chinese philosophies and belief systems, water as an element has given rise to various religious, spiritual and philosophical approaches. Water in these approaches is often accepted as a life-giving and sustaining force but also as a life-threatening force, involved in the creation of myths and religious narratives. Its omnipresence, with its capacity for both creation and destruction, renders it a powerful and sublime symbol of nature's majesty and mystery. This part proceeds along the following lines of the multitude of cultural and religious understandings of elements, especially of water, ranging from ancient Greek to Islamic civilisations. These diverse understandings offer a deeper, more detailed view of water as an element that transcends the confinements of specific cultures and religions, emerging as a universal sublime symbol of the awe-inspiring power of the natural world. The recognition of elements within our current understanding relies on the changing historical and cultural contexts within an exceedingly long temporal perspective on the natural world. This perspective that highlights the continuing and ever-changing nature of elements like water, suggests a timelessness and transience within the vast, ungraspable cycle of the natural world, which are key aspects of the sublime. The elements, earth, fire, air, and water appear in the mythic and religious understandings of the ancient Chinese, Hindu, Greek, and other indigenous cultures,

as archaic and central bare bones especially in relation with the accounts of creation. Before the classical Greek phase of Pre-Socratic philosophers that assert a more rationalist aspect to the notion of elements and the natural phenomena; in indigenous cultures, the elements often play central roles in key cosmogonies, including the separation of earth from sky, the creation of life in primal waters, human emergence from earth, the animation of life through breath, or the stealing of fire from the gods (Macauley, 2010, 278). In many religious and mythological traditions, water is both revered and feared, and played a central role in cosmological narratives, rituals and symbolism. It is infused with various symbolic meanings, associated with flow, purity, generation, transformation and destruction. The depiction of water as the origin of life and the cosmos evokes a profound sense of astonishment and an existential and awe-inspiring contemplation in the face of such an elemental power. This corresponds with the sublime that overwhelms our usual rational comprehension and elicits a feeling of awe at something far beyond our own existence. These insights contribute to a deeper and multi-layered background for understanding how water is experienced and depicted in art, with its symbolic and sublime qualities that influenced artists and their creative processes.

3.2.1.1 *Water as an element in ancient greece.* In the classical sense, the elements generally refer to earth, air, fire, and water which were put forward to explain the complexity of the natural world and all the matter in terms of basic substances. (Ball, 2004) However, according to Aristotle's accounts, before the pluralist proposition of the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles that there are four elements which are accepted as fundamental bare bones of existence; as earth, air, fire and water; the three first philosophers from Miletus; Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes claimed that there was a single and universal material substance that is both the origin and the *arche* (ruling principle) of all things and their continuing nature. Although the Pre-Socratic philosophers differ in terms of defining the fundamental substance as one or many, the interest in questioning the ruling principles of the natural world and natural phenomena remains within their cosmological inquiries. These Pre-Socratic philosophers, especially natural philosophers, focused not only on soul, mind and existence, but also on the open sky, the flickering fire, the never-ending flow of water and layered complexity of earth. By engaging with the elements, they seek to

find a ruling principle as *arche*, a fundamental order as *logos* and a main purpose, goal as *telos*. Their inquiries and investigations to uncover the underlying fundamental and primordial principles reflect a quest to understand the sublime essence of the natural world. During these times understanding the natural world, including the characteristics of the elements, were associated with philosophical inquiries on the human condition, mind and existence. This holistic approach to knowledge acknowledges the elements not just as part of the physical realm, but as entities deeply connected to the realms of thought and metaphysics.

The ancient approaches to the elements recognizes their role in the cosmos and their influence on human thoughts, resonates with the capacity of the sublime to transcend the limitations of comprehension and ordinary experience as part of a metaphysical exploration. In these ancient periods, starting from the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., theories about nature and human-centered theories of mind and being were not separated from each other as sharply as today. Currently, the elements become more apparent at crisis times, when they disappear or fail to function as today (Macauley, 2010, pp. 13-14). As one of these elements, water has unique attributes such as fluidity, dynamic power and unfathomable immensity, which are not merely physical but also reflective of the mysteries of existence. They all resonate with the capacity of sublime to connect the physical natural realm with the realms of thought and metaphysics.

Thales, whom Aristotle regarded as the founder of natural and Greek philosophy, defines the first principle as water, in the basis of all matters and form relies on water as the natural substance:

“For there must be some nature, either one or multiple, out of which the other things come into being while that one is preserved. About the number and kind of such sources, however, they do not all say the same thing, but Thales, the founder of this sort of philosophy, says it is water (for which reason too he declared that the earth is on water), getting hold of this opinion perhaps from seeing that the nourishment of all things is fluid, and that heat itself comes about from it and lives by means of it (and that out of which things come into being is the source of them all). So he got hold of this opinion by

this means, and because the seeds of all things have a fluid nature, while water is in turn the source of the nature of fluid things” (Aristotle, trans. 2002).

Thales’s idea that acknowledges water as the *arche* and the source of the nourishment of all things as it is fluid by nature suggests a kind of sublimity that reflects the dynamism and omnipresence of the element. Since no original information source of Thales is available, we can only speculate from secondhand thoughts attributed to him about the reasons why he introduced water as *arche*, the ruling principle of everything. The principle that all things come from water and will return to water can be read in relation to the unique ability of water that can transform itself into three states- what we call now as the liquid, gaseous and solid- all possible material possibilities. The fact that water turns into ice when it cools and vapor when it is heated indicates that water exists in all things in all forms in different ways without being annihilated. In everything that changes, it exists and remains permanently. “Overcoming mythos (myth) through logos (reason) and scientific observation Thales was able to discern an underlying unity to all reality in the “substance” of water...” (Macauley, 2005, 2). It gives a sense of awe and astonishment and a reception of something greater and more sustainable, enduring than human existence. Thales addresses the problem of the *arche* of the universe and finds the answer from his investigations on nature with water. Although his theories is open to be read as deductionist in the sense that he claims water as the sole source, the primal origin of everything, his ancient approach that combines scientific observations with reason and philosophy provides a profound background for the contemporary reflections on the sublimity of water as it invites contemplation about the primal origins and the sublime nature of the universe that challenges and expands the limits of human recognition and understanding.

The Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus is renowned for his profound argument that “all flows” which signifies the idea that “everything changes”. This argument is vividly illustrated in his famous quote “One cannot step twice into the same river” highlighting the concept that the waters are in a continuous state of flux, change and never remaining the same. “The waters are never the same in relation to Heraclitus’s general doctrine of change: He believed that no individual thing in this universe has stability and permanence, for it will eventually be destroyed and changed into

something else” (Taran, 1989, 1). This argument highlights the fundamental principle of Heraclitus’s philosophy that defines the universe as a dynamic, fluid and ever-transforming entity, illustrated by the perpetual change and transformation of waters. The assertion that no individual thing has a stable and permanent state evokes a profound emotional response, aligning with the sublime experience. The recognition of the universe’s transient nature can evoke feelings of awe and astonishment as we confront an unpredictable natural force that is beyond our control and comprehension. In essence, Heraclitus’s statement recalls the sublime experience by pointing out the ever-changing, unfathomable and uncertain nature of water that resonates with the immense transformations and infinite flow that characterizes the universe. Engaging with a perpetual change invites us to acknowledge our place within the universe governed by transient, natural forces that are beyond human control and recognition.

Although Plato’s theory of Ideas or Forms, in which the natural world and the natural phenomena are imitations of non-physical essences of things, the four elements earth, air, fire and water have specific positions within his cosmological work *Timaeus* (Plato, 360 B.C.E./2000). Different from the Pre-Socratic philosophers that gave primacy to the elements, he presents them as geometrical and proportional in the sense they are designed by the reason of Demiurge -God-. Influenced by the *rhizomata* of Empedocles, he agrees that there are four elements that constitute the body of the universe and the individual bodies, however he claims that they are not eternal (Cornford, 2000). The elements are finite, but nevertheless they have a mathematical bond with each other. “The four primary bodies form the “frame” of a visible, tangible cosmos, which requires no more or no less of these entities, and the Demiurge leaves nothing of earth, air, fire, and water outside this picture (Macauley, 2010, 146).

Taking further the accounts of the Pre-Socratic philosophers -like Anaximenes’s and Heraclitus’s doctrine of change- and preceding the accounts of Hegel, Heidegger and the Post-Structuralists that generally seek for the elements as ever changing things-in-themselves, Plato represents the elements as formed by their powerful and unordered motion and thus as creating the realm of becoming within the universe even if not in a higher reality. Alongside that they are products of reason as he puts in *The Laws*;

“Fire and water, earth and air—so they say—all owe their being to nature and chance, none of them to art; they, in turn, are the agents, and the absolutely soulless agents, in the production of the bodies of the next rank, the earth, sun, moon, and stars. They drifted casually, each in virtue of their several tendencies; as they came together in certain fitting and convenient dispositions -hot with cold, dry with moist, soft with hard, and so in all the inevitable casual combinations which arise from blending of contraries” (Plato, 2004, 889b-c).

Therefore, the elements are not material substances that have permanent essences, but rather are evanescent, elemental phases of their never-ending becoming. The environmental place of the never-ending becoming of elements within *Timaeus* is defined “as a ‘Receptacle’”(hypodochē) of becoming, a “matrix” (ekmageion) and “recipient” (dechomenon) as well as a “mother” (meter) and a “nurse” (tithene) (Macauley, 2010, 156). And the term chora -khora- that is coined later than these definitions, refers to “a ‘stage’—setting, place, and seat—to view the relations of our “characters” and subsequently a locale for the four elements to work out their intricate and ordered steps, their choreography—choreia means dance, from choros, dance or place for dancing—” (Macauley, 2010, 157). Although he seems as if he is favoring earth as the *terra firma*, as the more spatial and stable of the latter three elements that provides a dwelling place, *chora* is different from the earth base. Heidegger interprets *chora* as neither space nor place, but rather as that “which is occupied by what stands there” (Macauley, 2010, 159). By this account, *chora* resembles the formlessness of water that provides a matrix of form for other substances to occupy. Water, by being a matrix for the processes of becoming and a liminal space between life and death, darkness and light, conduction and reflection carries the similar ontological qualities with *chora*. This liminality, inherent both in the concept of *chora* and water, embodies the essence of sublime by capturing these interplays.

Taught and influenced by Plato, Aristotle’s theories on nature and elements take their primary departure points from the thoughts of Pre-Socratics and Plato, nevertheless he introduces new and critical accounts on nature (*physis*) associated with place, motion and change. In the collection of his canonical treatises and lessons, *Physics* he states nature as the cause and principle of beings in motion and change.

Therefore, he signals that nature itself is a processual and ever-changing concept. In his treatise known as *On Generation and Corruption*, he takes the so-called four elements of Empedocles as the terrestrial elemental bodies that are subject to constant change unlike the unchanging celestial aether, which is introduced by him as the fifth element. Aristotle breaks down the classical elements—fire, air, water, and earth—into more fundamental components, specifically the opposing primary qualities of hot and cold, dry and wet, combined with the concept of prime matter. "These items - the contraries alone, or together with prime matter - are considered the true elements of bodies because together they compose fire, air, water, and earth..." (Crowley, 2008, 224). These qualities are regarded as the true elements of bodies, forming the classical elements through their dynamic interactions. This perspective highlights the dual nature of water, both as a physical element shaped by opposing forces and as a symbol of transformation and balance, reflecting its enduring significance in philosophical and cultural thought.

The constant action of these contraries imitates the circular motion between fire, air, water and earth. "For when Water is transformed into Air, Air into Fire, and the Fire back into Water, we say the coming-to-be 'has completed the circle,' because it reverts again to the beginning" (Aristotle, 2018, 337a). Consequently, he questions the eternal and unchangeable elements of Empedocles by introducing a continuous motion of 'coming to be' and 'passing away' in between fire, air, water and earth. He conceptualizes the elements as subject to constant motion and change by dissecting the primal elements of Empedocles into their more primal qualities (the qualities of hot and cold, dry and wet). This assertion views nature and the elements as dynamic and ever-changing processes. Water's capacity to change and its role within this constant cycle of 'coming to be' and 'passing away' highlights its importance as an elemental force that embodies the power and mystery of the natural universe. The never-ending interplay of the contrary primal qualities resulting in the formation and transformation of water reveals water's capacity to manifest the profound and immense motion and transformation that characterises the universe. Therefore, embracing water not just as a physical substance but as a crucial and intrinsic element in the immense, eternal cycle of creation and transformation resonates with the notion of sublime. This processual and ever-changing concept of nature underscores the significance of water in engaging

with the sublime, revealing its intrinsic connection and its capacity to manifest its everlasting transformation without being annihilated.

From Thales's primordial positioning of water as the *arche* of all existence, to Heraclitus's doctrine of perpetual flux and change illustrated by water, to Plato's formless and liminal space *khora*, and to Aristotle's processual and ever-transforming nature of elements, these philosophical inquiries have not only influenced our understanding of the natural world but also created a background about how the characteristics of water such as its fluidity, ever-transformation, formlessness and immensity embody and reflect a broader and unfathomable power that governs the natural universe. This highlights the eternal and universal significance of water as an elemental force and resonates with the concept of sublime that transcends our ordinary capacity of recognition. These insights contribute to a deeper and multi-layered background for understanding how water is experienced and depicted in art as it influenced the very primal and fundamental concepts in arts and culture.

3.2.1.2 Water as an element in ancient eastern philosophy and religion. In almost the same period with Thales, in Eastern philosophy water is a crucial image and metaphor especially in Taoism which is rooted in China. Within the ancient Taoist thought, the five elements as Wood (木 *mù*), Fire (火 *huǒ*), Earth (土 *tǔ*), Metal (金 *jīn*), and Water (水 *shuǐ*), signify the five dynamic and transitional phases or energies rather than materials. From these five phases that interact with each other to form the cycles of generation and negation, water becomes the major symbol in Taoist philosophy with its characteristics. Tao is highly related with the terms fluidity, movement, process and rhythm- which are foundational for “flow”. In the key text of Taoism written by Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* water is seen as the nourishment of all things without aiming to; and like water, Tao is depicted as a fluid that slowly comes to life within a shape that has no shape (Macauley, 2010, p.43). Similar to Thales's *arche*, Lao Tzu describes Tao as the ultimate reality behind all existence and describes it as “flow” or “way” which are associated with the characteristics of water. This depiction of the ultimate reality that is based on the flow recalls the sublime nature of water which is evident in its portrayal as a deep, vast, and infinite pool that shapes and sustains all existence without effort. The sublimity of water resonates with the infinite potential and the profound mystery of Tao.

“The Way is like an empty vessel that yet may be drawn from. Without ever needing to be filled. It is bottomless, the very progenitor of all things in the world. In it all sharpness is blunted. All tangles untied. All glare tempered. All dust smoothed. It is like a deep pool that never dries” (Lao Tzu as cited by Wilson, 1995, 374).

Alongside relating water with the ruling principle of existence, Lao Tzu also connects water with the highest virtue and the highest way of living which are inherited in the meaning of Tao;

“The supreme goodness is like water. It benefits all things without contention. In dwelling, it stays grounded. In being, it flows to depths. In expression, it is honest. In confrontation, it stays gentle. In governance, it does not control. In action, it aligns to timing. It is content with its nature, and therefore cannot be faulted” (Lao Tzu cited by Mitchell, 1988, 13).

In Tao Te Ching, the analogy of water, mainly its effortless and intrinsic ability to flow, is used to represent the characteristics of the ultimate reality behind existence. It has opened discussion topics such as change, unity and multiplicity regarding the characteristics of water. Its ability to nurture all living things and accept them within itself is related to the highest virtue, its flexibility of flowing everywhere is related to versatility and finally its ability to exist in all states is associated with being open to change or transformation. This analogy of water relates the Taoist flow -which is accepted as the ultimate reality and principle- to the experience of the sublimity of water as it is something vast, inexhaustible and beyond human comprehension.

In Chinese philosophy, the ruling principle, fundamental order, and values of virtue are mainly discussed with references to natural principles. This consideration of natural principles as the basis of human conduct is already given by the earlier philosophers. Confucius, the progenitor of Lao Tzu, highlights the relationship between human and nature, especially water “.... the goodness of human nature is like the downward course of water. There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward” (Confucius

as cited by Engberts, 2006, 3). Like Lao Tzu, Confucius meditated on water and assumed that all the ruling principles and fundamental order are embodied in all the manifestations of water. However, while Confucius and his successors studied water to systematize the underlying principles of people's moral and ethical qualities, Lao Tzu and his successors sought to find the supreme goodness and ultimate reality behind all existence.

Alongside their difference, in both of their fondness of using water as an analogy, there lies the search for virtue, whether social or individual. Although the study of water was common both in Chinese and ancient Greek philosophy, their approaches differ. They both rely on the analogies and principles of the natural world in search of the hidden ruling principles of reality beneath existence. However, their main goals behind their searches are different due to the difference of their common concerns and problems. Chinese philosophers, such as Lao Tzu and Confucius, often searched for moral lessons from it. Distinctly, Western philosophy, rooted primarily in Greek thought, has mostly focused on exploring metaphysical and scientific inquiries (Chan, 1988).

In both traditions, water has a central role, and the sublime emerges from a deep engagement with the natural world, whether through moral and existential concerns or through metaphysical and scientific inquiry. This engagement with nature and natural elements, especially with water, reveals the profound interconnectedness of all things and the transcendental qualities of reality that inspire awe, reverence, and a sense of the sublime.

At around the same era, in the 6th century BC in Indian thought and living, water has a crucial significance as well. Different from Western and Chinese thoughts, the significant position of water relies mainly on religious bases. Although it is impossible to determine its exact beginning, the earliest evidence of Hinduism dates back to around 600-500 BCE in the Indus River Valley. Many sacred Hindu places are located near rivers from its origination. With the Hindu understanding of the power of water to purify, cleanse and forgive the sins, they believed that all the seven rivers including Indus and Ganges are sacred and holy. "Hindus believe that ablution at intersections of holy rivers has a great religious significance for their spiritual purification. The river Ganges is personified as goddess and other rivers, lakes, ponds, springs are also associated with the local pantheon of gods or goddesses (Hewamanage, 2011, 450).

As the ablution in these rivers is seen as a path to spiritual purification, it reflects a deep reverence and awe for the natural elements. This view resonates with the concept of the sublime, where an encounter with something vast and powerful transcends ordinary experience and evokes a sense of awe, astonishment, and spiritual elevation.

In the Hindu belief system, both in its mythological background and in contemporary daily life, water retains its sacred significance. The rhythm of life is determined near and by water. It not only provides a holistic and divine prosperity but also nurtures as a natural resource and cleanses both physically and spiritually. The continuous engagement with water in both ordinary and spiritual contexts mirror the sublime experience of encountering something vast and deeply integrated into our lives yet possesses a profound, otherworldly significance.

Due to the geographic proximity, Hinduism interacts with Buddhism in India which originated near the Ganges River. Similar but also different to Hinduism, water is respected within the Buddhist religious world as part of the creation and as a sacred endowment of nature which symbolizes purity, flow and calmness. Within the Buddhist practices, spiritual purification in terms of eliminating the impurity and cultivating the virtues of calmness is important. However, unlike Hinduism, Gautama Buddha did not believe that ultimate purification comes from immersion to water and cleansing physically. According to his thoughts, in which the ability of water to purify seems more metaphorical, one has to prevent oneself from cruel deeds and greed by inner bathing.

“In the common sense, though Buddhism and its culture honor and respect water very much they do not hold that spiritual purification is possible by mere physical bathe as some religious teachers held. The ultimate goal of spiritual purification, *nibbāna* is a result of ‘inner bathe’. Considering clouds as gods who make rain, using the term *deva* for rain, appreciating preparing water shade as meritorious deeds are some examples of changed attitudes in Buddhism towards water” (Hewamanage, 2011, 450).

Alongside being the symbol of purity and calmness, the persistent and continuous water cycle with its different formations from clouds to rain is crucial as part of the Dharma, the principle of divine ecology for Buddhism. “An important

premise is the Buddhist notion that all beings are interconnected and exist by their interrelationship with all other parts of nature. It is therefore crucial to Buddhists to live in harmony with the environment” (Kley, & Reijerkerk, 2009, 50). The concept of interconnectedness asserts that every element and being in the universe is interrelated and connected in a grandiose and infinite web of relationships. Their existence and movement are inherently tied to each other as part of an infinite flow. Water is a crucial element that illustrates this infinite interconnectedness and flow with its cyclical movement. The sublime aspect of water lies in this infinite flow of interconnectedness and its omnipresence, highlighting its essential role in sustaining life.

As one of the most crucial life-sustaining elements, water has a primordial and prominent place in both cultural and religious systems, ranging from ancient mythologies to major world religions. After ancient Greek and Eastern belief systems which were discussed above briefly, Judaism and Christianity share established ancient spiritual rituals and origin stories related with water. As a symbol of purification and cleansing, in Judaism the immersion ritual, in Christianity baptism, have a significant and regenerative meaning. As a religious performance and practice the immersion to water and then reemergence signifies the cycle in between death and rebirth in both major religions. In the Old Testament of the Bible that closely resembles the Hebrew Bible, the significance of water for cleansing and purification discussed earlier can also be seen. Furthermore, water is mentioned as created on the first day of God’s creation of the world and as something that brings life, heal and wash away people’s sins (Kley, & Reijerkerk, 2009).

It has also a crucial position in the major mythological stories in Genesis as the Great Flood as it exemplifies the terror and awe that water can evoke. It represents a return to chaos that precedes a new creation. This duality of annihilative and generative power of water reminds its sublimity, where elemental forces evoke both terror and admiration. Furthermore, in Exodus as the crossing over of the Red Sea by Israelites, in all Abrahamic religions as Hebrew, Christian and Islam, and in the story of Genesis depicts God's decision to transform the Earth to its pre-creation state of watery chaos and then reform it in a reversal of creation (Bandstra, 2009, 61). It carries the idea that water has the power of annihilation and generation. Similarly, the story of Exodus depicts water’s life-generating qualities. These themes remind us of the sublimity of

water by embracing both its generative and annihilative power, evoking awe and astonishment.

As water and its primordial place is considered in many religions and belief systems, in a similar way the Koran highlights the crucial role of water in the creation process and sustainability of life on Earth in several verses. The importance of water is inserted in the teachings of Koran which influences daily life practices and rituals. One of these rituals is the mandatory washing (ablution), which is accepted as the beginning of the state of purity and cleanliness. This purifying ritual is not only meant to clean the body from dirt and dust but also clean one's soul spiritually. The profound significance of water in the Koran, underscores its sublime ability of life-giving, transformation and elevation, as it reflects its immense power to generate and its internal connection to the continuity of existence. This perspective inspires awe and astonishment, as it acknowledges water as a primordial force that connects the material and the spiritual, the physical and the metaphysical.

To sum up, as Braun argues; “within the religious world water is understood to be a part of creation, a gift to humanity, not just as economic capital which only needs to be administered” (Braun, 2005, 36). Throughout history and across every part of the world, water has always been a source of power, sustainability, and influence. It carried multiple meanings within religious and spiritual understandings and rituals. However, the evolution of modern civilizations, humanism, and the development of the scientific studies on nature as a separate field from philosophy, mainly resulted with the replacement of water that carries spiritual and religious values by water that is domesticated and controlled over as a source of power for humanity.

This part provided a brief background on the understanding and significance of water in religious and mythical stories before the modern era. The following section will examine how the significance of water has shifted due to humanity's increasing ability to control and manage it as a resource, moving away from its perception as a source of power and inspiration. It will delve into the contrasting perspectives, where Romantics view water as a sublime influence, inspiring awe, and emotion, while Empiricists regard it primarily as a utilitarian resource.

On the one hand, it will consider its inherent sublime power of generation and annihilation, and on the other, humans' endeavour to harness this sublime force for practical purposes. This provides a pathway to understanding how the term sublime,

which was once related solely to nature, has evolved, as it remains as a crucial subject that is migrated into an edge between being perceived as something natural and, simultaneously, technological and human made.

3.2.2 Water in between reason and emotion: from enlightenment to romanticism. The period of Renaissance, then Scientific Revolution which spanned The Enlightenment, isolated nature and the elements from their spiritual and religious understandings and located them as part of the scientific investigations. Nature started to lose its spiritual, religious, and philosophical significance and transitioned to the field of sciences as a source that is to be studied, observed and controlled. This shift aligns with Max Weber's concept of the "disenchantment of the world" (Entzauberung der Welt), reflecting the shift towards rationalism and scientific understanding which stripped the world of its mystical and magical qualities (Weber, 1946).

Up until the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance period, it did not seem possible to distinguish natural sciences from natural philosophy. With the Renaissance, new approaches in the field of philosophy emerged, as well as significant developments in the sciences. Nevertheless, within the period which is called the middle or dark ages the scientific developments and innovations of Arab and Muslim scientists paved the pathway of Renaissance. While the implication of the elements in questioning the material world in ancient Greek, Indian and Chinese cultures, air, earth, fire and water was more philosophical, during the Islamic Golden Age medieval middle eastern scientists had more practical and experimental approaches on elements to master them for the advance of technology. The underestimated influence of Muslim heritage on Renaissance includes many advanced and groundbreaking water experiments and technologies. Beginning from the eighth century, these developments included the mechanical water clock of Ibn Al-Haytham, water raising machines of Al-Jazari, water pump of Taqi Al-Din and many more. By being harnessed and adopted by European scientists, these technologies did not cease but developed under the scientific studies of Europe mostly.

For philosophers, scientists and artists, water both as an essence to other beings and as one of the primal sources of energy, became one of the main preoccupations. "People like Leonardo da Vinci, Goethe, Novalis and Hegel were still able to approach the true nature of water. However, approaches on natural elements

were not based only on the search of their archetypical and fundamental principles, but also on the preoccupations of getting mastery over them” (Schwenk, 2004, 9). The desire to get mastery over water like other elements increased the motivation of observing its movements and transformations within the artistic, scientific, and philosophical approaches.

Towards the 17th century, philosophical approaches on nature and the ruling principles of the universe tend to be replaced by information which are based on observation and experiment-centered definitions. The problem of the separation of natural philosophy and natural sciences came to the fore and they started to become more autonomous in their fields. In that period science became rooted more in empirical studies, observation and experimentation while philosophy, on the other hand, seemed to have a more speculative appearance. However, the distinction between the two fields, natural science and natural philosophy, did not seem so clear and accurate up until the nineteenth century.

With the rise of empirical studies in the early seventeenth century and with the rise of the duality between human and nature, water as well as the other elements lost their primacy within the physical, philosophical, and experiential areas. The changing relations to nature resulted in the replacement of elemental sensibility with study, observation, and control of elements.

The rise of experimental and scientific studies put forward by Francis Bacon and others marked a significant advancement in enabling humanity to develop technological skills and gain a sense of control over nature. Francis Bacon puts forward a scientific and experimental discourse on nature in relation with Christianity. “Due to the Fall from the Garden of Eden, Bacon believed, humans had lost its ‘dominion over creation.’ Bacon saw science and technology as the way to control nature” (Merchant, 2010, 4). The scientific revolution with empiricism as its accompanying philosophical approach transformed the mercy of nature’s power over humans into a resource that has to be controlled. “By separating subject from object, objectivity helped to constitute the belief that one could act upon the world without oneself being acted upon” (Hayles, 1995, 56).

Alongside the scientific observation methods that had given humanity the illusion of control over nature, the rationalist, Cartesian view over nature states nature as a mechanical structure, “as a machine to be manipulated by human ingenuity”

(Merchant, 2010, 4). From the viewpoint that reason is the best way to get knowledge about reality and therefore nature, all the natural phenomena seemed as ordered and interconnected. This notion of mechanical order deduces nature into a measurable, stable, and consistent element thus it undermines the inconsistencies of a wild nature within a quasi-futile attempt. “Descartes held a priori reasoning, based on first causes or principles of nature established through geometry or mathematics, to be paramount in scientific inquiry” (Trochimchuk, 2008, 53). By this way he recedes the significance of the *a posteriori* data based on the empirical evidence into the background. At the same time, when evaluating the elements, it often serves the purpose of control and mastering them for anthropocentric ends. Therefore, Descartes puts forth the methods of “knowing the force and actions of fire, water, air” for the sake of making ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature (Descartes, 1980, 33).

By re-evaluation and upgrading the paradigms of the empiricist evidence and the scientific inquiry and misplacing the Cartesian mechanical view of nature, Isaac Newton asserts a scientific hypothesis on natural philosophy: “Natural Philosophy consists in discovering the frame and operations of Nature, and reducing them, as far as they may be, to general Rules or Laws – establishing these rules by observations and experiments, and thence deducing the causes and effects of things” (Newton, 2004, ix). Thus, nature, which until then was considered as the nurturing, archaic foundation changed radically with Enlightenment thinkers like Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, and their followers (Hampson & Parla, 1991).

As a consequence of these approaches, within the positivist paradigm that combines empirical observation methods with logical analysis, Auguste Comte establishes a lawfulness of natural phenomena. This lawfulness of natural phenomena asserts that “from the falling of stones to the movement of planets, followed ordered sequences of development. In the world of nature, science had succeeded in progressively contracting the realm of the apparently non ordered, the fortuitous and the accidental” (Coser, 1977, pp. 3-5). However, reducing natural phenomena to an observable and measurable source within the limits of scientific study, forgets a crucial and theoretical consideration which centuries later Husserl will assert:

“Science continues to presuppose this surrounding world as it is given in its particularity to the scientist. For example, for the physicist it is the world in

which he sees his measuring instruments, hears timebeats, estimates visible magnitudes, etc.—the world in which, furthermore, he knows himself to be included with all his activity and all his theoretical ideas” (Fjelland, 2002, 59).

The humanist, empiricist and Cartesian approaches of the Enlightenment encourages a more analytical understanding of the elements. The categorisation of the natural elements as sources subjected to scientific scrutiny leads to a kind of detachment from the natural world, where elements are observed as objects to be studied rather than entities with which we have a direct, influential relationship. Consequently, this detachment and hierarchical object-subject relationship between the human-subject and nature-object diminishes the immediacy of the experience of the sublime among nature.

Enlightenment’s analytical approach to the natural elements, while fostering scientific progress, also laid the pathway of the emergence of the technological sublime. The treatment of the elements as objects of observation and sources of power to be controlled, this period initiated a shift in how humanity apprehended nature. The domestication of natural forces, achieved through technological innovation and industrialization, gradually extended the sublime which was once inspired by untouched natural landscapes. As technologies became more developed and capable of reshaping the environment, they themselves began to evoke a new kind of sublime. From dams to canals, from bridges to industrial architecture, these technologies became symbols of human ingenuity and power. They provoked a sense of sublime similar to the encounter with nature’s vastness and unpredictability (Nye, 1994). This evolution reflects a profound transformation and shift in the experience of the sublime, as the immense and uncontrollable aspects of nature were extended toward human-made creations. This shift will be explored further in the context of art, particularly through the large-scale installation of Kapoor. Alongside the perception of elements as sources, some philosophers and theoreticians still tended to claim that the elements are filled with fundamental ontological qualities that are essential to other *beings*. As a reaction to the Enlightenment and the mechanical view which isolates nature in a binary opposition, nature and the elements re-discovered within the German tradition in the 18th and 19th century. Within the reemergence of natural philosophy, figures

associated with *Naturphilosophie* (philosophy of nature) such as Schelling, Goethe, Thoreau and Hegel regarded nature as a holistic and intertwining togetherness within a spiritual and romantic understanding.

“In ecological terms it is the cohesive power that binds all species of the earth together in a unified organism. For Thoreau, as for the pagans, the world was no mere system of mechanical order but a flux of energy capable of welding all things into an animated kosmos” (Worster, 1977, 81).

The Romantic period revives the ancient thought that relies on the strong association of elements with philosophy and furthermore with the mind. Carl Gustav Carus, a late German Romantic scientist and painter explored and made analysis on the links between scientific, artistic, and psychological events as an embracement of the idea of organic unity and the kinship among the events in nature and what happens in the soul. His essays on landscape were directly referencing souls and his lectures on psychology also had the basis from the events that happen in nature (Carus, 1824/2003). He takes attention to the connection between the events of the elements and what happens in the perception and imagination. Carus describes “the image of scudding clouds reflected in calm, clear water surrounded by rocks,” to emphasize the coherence between the reflecting surface of water in nature and reflections of past experiences and thoughts in memory (Draaisma, 2000, 75). This metaphor of Carus reminds us of a totally different approach to the relationship between water and thoughts claimed by Hegel as cited by Robert Stern in *Hegelian Metaphysics*:

“...water, or matter, or atoms are *thoughts*, universals, ideal entities, not things as they immediately present themselves to us, that is, in their sensuous individuality — not even the water of Thales. For although this is also empirical water, it is at the same time also the *in-itself or essence* of all other things, too, and these other things are not self-subsistent or grounded in themselves, but are *posited* by, are *derived* from, an *other*, from water, that is they are ideal entities” (Stern, 2009, 260).

Although Thales's principle that everything comes from water and will return to water seems purely materialistic, as an idealist philosopher Hegel regards Thales's empirical water as a non-empirical essence in the sense that it cannot be taken simply at face value. By claiming that water, matter, or atoms are thoughts, he argues that these non-empirical essences tend to reveal a higher reality, ideality when they immediately present themselves to us (Wallace, 2005, 94). This argument puts water both as a fundamental material and as a philosophical idea in-itself since it transcends its immediate sensual presence.

By asserting that everything comes from water, Thales foreshadows the modern scientific view that life originated on water (Macauley, 2010, p.43). In a different but similar reading, Nietzsche claims that Thales's manifestation of the singular basis of the world and nature as water, rises him up to the level of philosophical understanding as well as scientific: "First, because it tells something about the primal origin of all things; second, because it does so in a language devoid of image and fable, and finally, because contained in it, if only embryonically, is the thought, 'all things are one' " (Sallis, 2000, 192).

The reappearance of the notion of elements and nature in the romantic period provided a basis for ecological discourses alongside the increasing disruption of the environment. Environmental historian Donald Worster argues that,

"...at the very core of the romantic view of nature of the late 18th and 19th centuries was what later generations would come to call an ecological perspective: that is, a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse. With the vast organism that constitutes the earth. Each of these themes carried the arcadian consciousness to a new level of refinement, assertiveness, and influence" (Worster, 1977, 82).

Romantic philosophy and understanding reacts to the certainties, detachments and dualities brought by the Enlightenment philosophy. This reaction and questioning resonate in the Romantic period's understanding of nature and elements, which is significantly different from the Enlightenment perspectives. Romantic philosophers and artists emphasized the unpredictable, uncontrollable, and awe-inspiring aspects of

nature -which especially depicted through seascapes- that aligns closely with the concept of sublime. Romanticism's focus on the sublime as a key aesthetic and philosophical concept reflects its reaction against the Enlightenment rationalist perspective as it embraces the powerful, mysterious depths of the natural world. This focus makes obvious the reason for the strong association of the sublime understanding of nature in arts and philosophy with the Romantic era. The Romantic view that has a significant impact and influence on the ecological perspectives, fosters a deep respect to the intrinsic value and interconnectedness of all life forms. This kind of ecological approach does not refer only to nature itself or only to the forces of elements but also involves human presence as interdependence and a search for common ground between culture and nature.

Alongside the Romantic views on nature, especially beginning from the seventeenth century, with the rise of the scientific understanding of nature and the development of scientific practices, humanity gained knowledge about the elements by experimenting them in confined and controlled spaces by deducing their motions to parts of a measurable and consistent mechanical order or by establishing a lawfulness of the outer appearance of all the natural phenomena. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, water, as other elements, was still regarded as an element but not only within the archaic understanding of Pre-Socratics or Romantics, but rather it also became a chemical compound. After a century that passed with a great number of experiments that influenced one another, water was transformed into a chemical compound of hydrogen and oxygen and thus became H_2O . " H_2O is a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and that calls for technical management. It is an observed fluid that has lost the ability to mirror the water of dreams" (Illich, 1985, 76).

Although these scientific practices were designed to deepen humanity's understanding of the natural world, they created a hierarchical relationship between the human and the elements as resources by undermining the value of subjective and inner experiences among them. Nevertheless, it provided a basis for the introduction of a critical, scientific and philosophical thought, phenomenology, which shifts the focus from an observing subject confronting an objectified world to an experiencing subject immersed in the natural world, where all experience becomes possible.

3.2.3 Evolving currents: water in modern and contemporary perspectives.

The phenomenological and continental thought of the 19th and 20th centuries tends to return to the elements and elemental sensibility and paves the path for reconsideration of the four elements. Phenomenological studies on nature dwell on our changing relations to the natural and environmental world by focusing on the natural phenomena, the appearance of other-than-human things -such as elements. As a response to the former philosophical approaches such as Empiricism and Rationalism, Phenomenology addresses the human-nature relationship not as dualism but rather as an intertwining and interdependence. Within this togetherness, the natural elements and the environment are not held as objects of observation under human control anymore but rather as phenomenal things that appear in our experience.

“How we experience the world, in this case, the natural world, can be seen as the possibility to retrieve a relationship to nature that has been largely lost in modernity. It is then not surprising that the field of environmental phenomenology, or eco-phenomenology, has become a prominent approach within environmental philosophy” (Kuperus & Starr, 79, 2020).

Since the term nature is a more processual and abstract term, exploring the ever-changing relations to the natural world through the elements and elemental phenomena creates a more direct and graspable understanding on the forgotten primacy of nature. Focusing on earth, fire, air, and water which are directly accessible to our senses, allows us to experience them with a more physical, visceral and immediate understanding. To observe the flame’s brightness, feel the dryness of earth, breathe the freshness of air and tasting and smelling the various textures and flavours of water offer us a more tangible and concrete approach in contrast to nature’s vague and debated concept that leads to complex understandings related to epistemology ontology and metaphysics (Macauley, 2006). This perspective can easily be related to the experience of the sublime that is evoked by natural phenomena, as it creates a background for the physical, emotional, and sensory dimensions of the sublime experience. This perspective enriches the sublime experience which is often characterized as an awe-inspiring and overwhelming sensation by paving a more immediate, visceral and sensorial path for the experience.

This exploration of experiential and philosophical relationships with elemental phenomena provides a vital foundation for the thesis's central focus on water and its sublime nature. By engaging with the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Casey, and Bachelard, This section traces the experiential and philosophical relationships with the elements and elemental phenomena -especially with water and the watery phenomena- together with the spatio-temporal experience of the "lifeworld" of Edmund Husserl, the unity of the fourfold of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau Ponty's element of Being, "flesh", the elemental landscapes of Edward Casey and, substantially the material imagination of Gaston Bachelard who dedicates a series of books on the elements of earth, fire, air, and water. The text focuses on water not only as a physical element but as a phenomenological and entity to be revered, shaping human imagination, perception and understanding. These philosophers emphasize the interconnection between humans and the natural world, challenging the hierarchical formation between the subject and object. Water, as an ever evolving and fluid element, becomes a medium that intertwines the boundaries of being and becoming, presence and absence, and the actual and imagination. The material imagination, as highlighted by Bachelard, emphasises water as a source of profound imaginative, symbolic, and sensory engagement, elevating its role as a carrier of the sublime across philosophical, historical, and artistic contexts. By rooting the analysis in these philosophical inquiries, the text deepens its interdisciplinary approach into how water's inherent characteristics such as fluidity, immensity, and dynamism evoke the sublime and reveal the evolving relationships between humanity, nature, and the cosmos.

Phenomenological approach on elements and elemental phenomena slightly shifts from the classical understanding of natural Greek philosophy that explores the elements as constituting and ruling principles towards focusing on their inherent manifestation and appearance of the elements. Therefore, it creates a bridge in between the ancient and classical understandings on the elements that assert cosmological speculations and, our current encounter and experience with the envioning world. Although some of these philosophers do not focus directly on the phenomenology of water, but more on the elements and the envioning world in general, this text traces how the experience and appearance of the element water has affected our imagination and consideration of both the natural and sensuous world. Water, either as the

primordial womb from which life is born, or as clear or violent surface waters of the world, is an element which reveals its intrinsic values such as purity, fluidity, immensity, and reflectivity in the profound depths of imagination.

Husserl, as the precursor of phenomenology, challenges the dualism between nature and experience alongside his critique of the Cartesian dualism that creates a hierarchical structure between the thinking subject and the object world. Within the common understanding of Empiricists and Rationalists, nature becomes an object that is given in its particularity to the human who is capable of controlling the object world -including nature- by means of their ability to think and observe from their privileged stance. Influenced by the former thoughts of Franz Brentano, Husserl introduces the subject-object relationship as an intentional and interdependent constitution. He emphasizes that the consciousness of the subject always has an intention towards the objects within the *Lebenswelt*, Lifeworld. By intentionality, the consciousness does not construct but constitutes the objects within the horizons of the world.

“It is this world that we find to be the world of all known and unknown realities. To it, the world of actually experiencing intuition, belongs the form of space-time; together with all the bodily (*körperlich*) shapes incorporated in it; it is in this world that we ourselves live, in accord with our bodily (*leiblich*) personal way of being” (Husserl, 1936/1970, 50).

The world is not the assemblage of all the things we encounter but is the place that makes possible the experience of anything at all. It is “the world with which we begin and from which subjectivity or consciousness and its experiences can never be separated, the lifeworld” (Donohoe, 2016, 19-20).

Lifeworld -*Lebenswelt*- is the horizon or the presumed background of all our possible experiences. This notion does not reduce nature to a thing that exists independently within the major anthropocentric worldview but rather allows us to see nature as the one and only pregiven, primal ground that makes our experiences possible. By challenging the dualism between nature and experience, and positing nature, -therefore including elements like water-, as an integral, primal component of the Lifeworld, his thoughts make us think of a foundational background for experiencing sublimity of nature and the natural elements like water, not merely as

aesthetic or sensory phenomena but as primal aspects of our engagement with the world. Regarding nature and natural elements not just as physical entities but as a precondition for the possibility of experience itself, resonates with nature's immensity, timelessness, and its sublime capacity to evoke awe and astonishment.

This perspective shifts the dialogue from a more anthropocentric viewpoint, where nature is objectified, to a more dynamic and holistic appreciation of nature as a co-constitutive element. His reflection on living constantly and directly in a "conscious" and actively engaged state within the certainty of the world, is deeply related to the experience of the sublime. 'To live is always to live-in-certainty-of the-world. Waking life is being awake to the world, being constantly and directly "conscious" of the world and of oneself as living in the world, experiencing, and actually effecting the ontic certainty of the world' (Husserl, 1970, 142-43).

In the combination of acknowledging nature as the horizon of all possible experiences and living as the active participation in the certainty of the world, it creates a kind of sublime that occurs in the dynamic process of interaction between the active individual, the Lifeworld, and the transcendent aspects of reality.

The concept of the Lifeworld references earth as the primordial, pregiven and the spatio-temporal horizon of all possible experience of things. Derrida, when analysing Husserl, claims that the earth is "the most universal, the most objectively exhibited element given to us" (Derrida, 1989, 81). We do not encounter the particular qualification of the element water like the earth; however, Lifeworld is the horizon of the spatial but also of the temporal experiences in a way that referencing the primordial flux of the consciousness. When speaking of time, again he uses an earth-based definition as *field*, but asks the question: "We move in a field of phenomena. But why do I say *field*? It is nearly a *Heraclitian flux* of phenomena" (Husserl, Alston, & Nakhnikian, 1970, 37). The concept of the Lifeworld embraces both the spatial and temporal dimensions of experience in a similar way that Plato's liminal and fluid space of becoming: *khora*. It aligns with the Heraclitean notion of flux, recalling the characteristics of water such as its fluidity, perpetual change and its transient nature which are also central to the experience of the sublime. Since his phenomenological approach views nature as the primal background of all possible experiences, it elevates our encounter with nature and natural elements to a level of existential significance. The experience of sublime occurs in the encounter with the phenomena that transcends

our rational boundaries, such as vast landscapes, turbulent waters, powerful natural phenomena or profound artworks. As the horizon of all these phenomena and our experiences occurs, the Lifeworld itself becomes sublime with its immense and transient nature of existence.

The philosopher who made contributions in the fields of philosophy of science and poetics, Gaston Bachelard with a mixed method of phenomenology, psychoanalytic approaches and poetic criticism, devotes a great amount of his works to material imagination, in a way reminiscent of Husserl. Reverie, the creative daydream, lies at the heart of Bachelard's phenomenological metaphysics in which he intertwines the soul with the material imagination. Although he does not use Husserl's terminology, he appropriates his manner in the sense that 'reverie' may be ultimately described as a phenomenology of the imagination insofar as he views the imagination as intrinsically rooted in the world, and the world as imaginable only via the archetypes of the imagination" (Picart, 1997, 60).

By coining the term material imagination, he emphasizes that the matter strongly affects the imagination. The objects of the material images are elements, ecological substances that "plumb the depths of being. They seek to find there both the primitive and the eternal" (Bachelard, 1942/2006, 1). Therefore, he focuses on the effects of the elements within a qualitative way, rather than the traditional, quantifiable and objective knowledge-based epistemology of them. This aligns closely with Kant's concept of the sublime, where the mind transcends the ordinary and confronts something beyond comprehension. Parallel to Kantian sublime that emerges from an encounter with vastness or dynamic power that overwhelms our sensories and comprehension, but elevates reason, Bachelard's engagement with the elements reveals their profound and overwhelming qualities, inspiring both awe and imaginative reflection. It also recalls Longinus's sublime which emerges from the greatness of ideas and the power of expression to elevate the soul (Longinus & Roberts, 2019). Through imaginative engagement with the elements, the mind transcends ordinary experiences towards exploring their profound and overwhelming sides, aligning with the concept of sublime. For Bachelard, who also worked in the field of the philosophy of science, the roots of both science and poetry emerge from the same source but go through different pathways as science tries to neglect the power of metaphors unlike poetry. Philosophy, nevertheless, tends to bring science and poetry together even as

two complementary contraries. He dedicates a series of books to the four elements - which he calls the hormones of imagination- in his studies that ranges from the symbolism of alchemical transformations of the elements to literary criticism, psychoanalysis, scientific history and imagination.

The elements are presented both with their inner and outer characteristics in a way that they refer to the understanding of elements in Pre-Socratic philosopher's thoughts which associate the ruling and fundamental principles with the four fundamental elements. These philosophers open a pathway to understand the elements through powerful elemental images such as the meditative waves of water, the volatility of air, the guiding lines of the earth, and the fickle flames of fire.

Bachelard favours these philosophical approaches, since "by studying them we may rediscover completely natural imaginative powers" of earth, air, fire, water and "in order for a reverie to continue with enough persistence to produce a written work . . . it must find its matter; a material element must give the reverie its own substance, its own law, its specific poetics" (Bachelard, 1942/ 2006, 3). He suggests classifying different types of imagination under the heading of the material elements, regarding the variety of their ontological characteristics, principles, substances and poetics of the material elements, which inspired the ancient philosophies and cosmologies (Bachelard, 1942/ 2006, 3).

He makes phenomenology of elements meet with poetics in one of his five books on the elements -which he calls hormones of imagination- and dwells specifically on water in *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. He reconsiders water in a Pre-Socratic sense as an element both inner and outer. In imagining and dreaming of water, the fluid substance reveals its implicit power and transcends its surface value. "This transcendental image sculptures the world and the dreaming object into a stable, unified universal being – a primal archetype. It simultaneously co-creates both the dreamed world and the dreaming subject" (Picart, 1997, 69-70). Therefore, by water, he means both the actual ponds and streams, the imaginative waters that reside in our dreams, reveries and also the transcendental image of water as a primal archetype. By understanding water through reverie and imagination, we delve into its interconnectedness, implicit power, and universal significance; it allows us to experience water in the immediate, natural and transcendental realms. Water, not only with its physical presence but with its many forms such as its imaginative and

transcendental experience, evokes the sublime. When we engage with water beyond its bare physicality, through reverie and imagination we delve into its deeper essence and power, paving a pathway to a sublime experience that transcends the ordinary towards its infinite interconnectedness.

Bachelard invites us to see by means of water while examining the phenomenology and psychology of clear waters, running waters, deep and dead waters, maternal and feminine water, pure water, and violent water as he navigates between shallow surfaces and immense depths of water. Alongside these he also associates the material imagination of water with its characteristics such as reflectivity, fluidity and purity. Although the water is transparent, making its immense depths visible from above, its reflective surface enables us and the world a kind of self-contemplation and a vision.

“We learn a new definition of the verb "to see," so that we can look beyond our own narcissism, beyond our own images reflected back to us, and begin to see, with Bachelard's help, the world looking at itself, loving itself. "The cosmos, then, is in some way clearly touched by narcissism," he writes” (Stroud, 2006, ix).

Within this narcissistic and inclusive way of seeing, through the reflectivity of water an imagery that transcends the boundaries of earth, sky and underwater where fishes can swim above the sky and clouds can float underwater is created (Bachelard, 1942/2006). “He traces poetic imagery to some of its unconscious archetypes, to show the interconnectedness of dream and matter, and to advance the theory that the gap between mind and environment is bridged by creative imagery” (Christofides, 1962, 266). By contemplating on the surface of water he makes us quite naturally imagine and dream through the reflection. The reflections on the surface of water create images that challenge and transcend our perception of reality, evoking a sense of awe, wonder and otherworldliness.

"The water we seek is the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination. More tangible than space, it is even more elusive. Because this water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors" (Illich, 1985, p. 24). Water with its never-ending flow is the transitory element. It refers to the endless changes within the

substance of being. In Bachelard's exploration of psychophysics and psychochemistry, water is characterized as being more transient, feminine, and receptive when compared to other elements. It embodies a Heraclitean philosophy in a way that symbolizes constant change and flow. Regarding the fluidity and transience of water, Boris Groys takes the Heraclitean argument of Bachelard further and draws an analogy between waves and our experience of the flow of time and history. Instead of comprehending time as linear or cyclical he suggests that “in everyday level of our existence we experience time precisely as a succession of waves, the beginnings, the ends and the turning points, after which nothing is as it was before. It may be different in shape, but it is similar in its trajectory – as transitory as every wave before and after it” (Groys, 2015, 34). Groys’ analogy of waves invites us to reconsider our perception of time and history. The wave-like understanding of time that underscores the transitory and ever-evolving nature of existence, mirrors the inherent fluidity and constant flux of water. Through this perspective, time and history become a series of successive waves, each reshaping our experiences just as water continually redefines the shores with every tidal movement. Groys’ wavy perspective on time resonates with Bachelard’s engagement with water beyond its physicality but through reverie and imagination.

Alongside the fluidity and continual flux of water that reminds us of the transformative and ever-evolving nature of existence, its clarity and transparency extend its symbolic role also as a purifier. “How could we conceive of purity without the image of clear and limpid water, without this beautiful pleonasm that speaks to us of pure water? Water draws to itself all images of purity” (Bachelard, 1942, 14). Water as a natural symbol of purity has had a primordial and prominent place throughout history with one of its highest values, the value of purification; as it is considered to have spiritual purifying, cleansing power within both Western and Eastern religious understandings.

This powerful value is associated with regeneration and rebirth within the religious rituals of immersion to water. The immersion to water and then reemergence signifies the cycle in between death and rebirth in moral and spiritual senses. Entering a space of fluid substance is reminiscent of pre-born life. Bachelard defines this leap into the water as a leap into the unknown (Bachelard, 1942, 165). This definition of him as part of his studies of imagination and psychoanalysis reminds us the profound

ambivalences of being and the duality of imagination. "Duality must exist for the imagination to be engaged: there must be a "dual participation of desire and fear, a participation of good and evil, a peaceful participation of black and white" for the material element to involve the entire soul" (Stroud, 2006, viii). The duality of this material element manifests itself within the imagination of the state of being immersed in water, which will later find its resonance in Viola's *Ascension*. The desire of being in the nurturing, maternal fluid space clashes with the fear of immersing, drowning within violent and destructive waters.

By exploring water -like the other primal elements- within an approach that intersects Pre-Socratic philosophy, phenomenology, and cultural ecology, he juxtaposes the material and imaginative, humane realms and unveils the interrelated and interdependent relation between nature and culture. Bachelard reawakens its deep, almost mystical significance that was diminished with The Enlightenment understanding. He leaves a legacy of water with an inclusive perspective that allows us to see the reflectivity, fluidity, and purity of water as if for the first time or in the way that it appeared to Pre-Socratics or in the fresh perspective of a child.

Heidegger, as a philosopher whose thoughts are influenced both by idealist and materialist philosophers, puts forward a unity of Being and the world in his seminal book *Being and Time* (1927). Influenced by Husserl's phenomenology that connects the subject with the pre-given and primordial Lifeworld -*Lebenswelt*- and challenges the Cartesian dualism, Heidegger introduces the notion of Being -*Dasein*- as Being-in-the-world. The unity of being and the world as Being-in-the-world also includes the unity of the four elements of his fourfold. He transforms the Pre-Socratic concept of the elements into a fourfold framework comprising the earth, the sky, divinities, and mortals. When we go through the elements of the fourfold, "we find that earth, 'the serving bearer,' is often described akin to his reading of the Greek conception of *physis* (nature)" (Macauley, 2010, 301). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines the experience of nature in the world as an experience of the totality of entities. These entities including the classical elements and therefore water, can be understood through two different phenomenological categories: as primordial 'ready-to-hand' resources as equipment and as 'present-at-hand' in the way that they stand apart from their functionality and present the bare facts about themselves which creates the bases of theories on them (Cooper, 2005).

When applied to water, this distinction allows us to see it both as a practical resource and as an essence with qualities like reflectivity, fluidity, and purity. This shift in perspective is crucial for understanding water in an elemental and philosophical sense.

In his 1939 lecture *‘On the Essence and Concept of Physis in Aristotle’s Physics B, I’* (Heidegger, 1998) and in his later writings like *An Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Contributions to Philosophy*, “this ‘primordial’ conception is identified with what Heidegger takes to have been the pre-Socratic Greek notion of *physis*. In experiencing nature as *physis*, the Greeks encountered it as a ‘process of arising’, as a ‘self-blossoming emergence’ or ‘upsurging presencing’ for us of the natural world” (Cooper, 2005, 342). According to his later writings, ‘*physis*’ refers to a process of spontaneous arising, emergence and coming into appearance and “...he insists that *physis* cannot be known but always becomes hidden by the world of finite appearances. Any adequate reflection on *physis* must acknowledge that it is no finite, knowable, appearing entity, but the unknowable precondition of the existence of such entities” (Stone, 2005, 291). Although Heidegger’s focus on ontological inquiry differs from the Romantic thought that is rooted in emotional or spiritual ideas, his ideas on nature resonate with it as he critiques the reduction of nature to a mere object of scientific control and exploration, aligning with their concern for the loss of nature's deeper, almost sacred, significance.

The argument of Heidegger also recalls the Heraclitean way of understanding nature; *‘physis kryptesthai philei.’* Nature loves to hide (Heraclitus, 1979, 33). Both for Heraclitus and Heidegger, nature -*physis*-, the process of emergence is not transparent to us. The notion of concealment of *physis*, reminds the modern technology and science that conceal the possible meanings and primacy of elements and raises the possibility of rethinking and unconcealing the pre-scientific tradition of the elemental world. In *Being and Time*, he claims that “the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the force of the most elemental words in which Dasein expresses itself” (Heidegger, 1962, 262). As the ancient Greek philosophers, he underscores the forgotten relationship between the elements and thought processes within the cultural sphere of language. However, it frequently appears in our language when we refer to the streams of consciousness; currents of thought; floods of insight; flowing words, ideas, and time; watershed events; well-springs and pools of information; waves of

success; turning tides; and other such metaphors. “In the case of water, such tropes and metaphors tend to underscore wholeness, cyclicity, and rhythm” (Macauley, 2010, 60-61). These metaphors and linguistic associations not only reflect the extensive presence of water in our thinking but also remind us of the interconnectedness. Water’s continuous movement becomes a powerful symbol of unity and the ever-changing nature of existence that creates both our inner and outer worlds.

“In the interplay between human and thing, the thing stands in a different realm of truth. A particular way of understanding water will always hide some other meaningful ways of revealing. Hence, to understand water in its all-plausible ways, we need to focus on the realm of ‘between,’ from which relationality emerges” (Paul, 2019, pp. 343-44). In his essay “*What is a Thing*”, Heidegger claims that we need to delve into the realm of ‘between’ which opens a pathway to relationality. Thinking of things arises in this very betweenness, liminality (Heidegger, 1967, 26). From this Heideggerian point of view, water as a liminality becomes water and barely discloses its all possible and multiple meaningfulness to us.

Influenced by the phenomenological foundations laid by Husserl and elaborated by Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, deeply concerned with the empiricist and rationalist representation of nature and the broken relationship of humans to nature. He challenges the former dualism of mind and body coined by Descartes, alongside the dualism of subject and the world by developing the Husserlian concept *Lifeworld*, as the pre-given and primordial background in which the subject perceives and experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1963/20220). For Merleau-Ponty the *Lifeworld* as the primordial, fundamental foundation that exists before intellectualisation, where the subject and the world are not separate entities of a dualistic structure, but deeply intertwined in a dynamic, continuous, and embodied relationship. From this perspective, human perception is not detached from the *Lifeworld*. This intertwined and dynamic structure between the subject and the world emphasises the inseparability of humans from nature, in a way that challenges the dualistic frameworks that once dominated philosophical thought. Within this point of view, the experience of the elements and sublimity among them takes on a new dimension. When experiencing the sublimity of water, it becomes an embodied experience emerging from a direct and live encounter with the world, rather than being a distant and intellectualised one. The vastness or terror of watery nature becomes events that affect and resonate within the

perceiving body itself, rather than an external natural phenomenon observed from distance. This point of view aligns with A.N. Whitehead's critique of the Cartesian and modernist perspective on nature as discussed in his book *The Concept Of Nature* (1920). Like Merleau-Ponty he rejects the Cartesian and modernist view of nature that reduces time and reality into an observable, calculable unit, independent from the past and future:

Whitehead argues that nature must be understood as a dynamic process—a “spatiotemporal unfurling” of interconnected elements that humans exist within and perceive through experience. Time, in particular, is seen as a natural process that flows through and is inseparable from the subject (Low, 2011, 11).

Both Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead argue that nature must be seen as a dynamic, intertwined process of time and space, inseparable from human experience.

In the courses on the concept of nature, Merleau-Ponty pictures nature as “pure passage,” in the sense that nature does not exist as a thing but rather exists as the processes of temporalization and spatialization (Bannon, 2011, 349). In relation with the spatio-temporality of the natural world he introduces a primordial concept: *la chair*, flesh, as the element of Being, as the bond between the embodied subject and the natural world. When speaking of flesh, he suggests an engagement between the perceiving embodied subject and the natural world that it exists within. The perceived and embodied world and the perceiving embodied subject unfolds into each other and also borrows from each other. “As a product of perceptual experience, the origin of flesh is within the perceiving body: sentient bodies become flesh through auto affection, and non-sentient bodies become flesh through being perceived” (Bannon, 2011, 341). However, Merleau Ponty claims that it is not the flesh of the body that makes us understand the living body, but rather it is the flesh of the world. By the concept of the flesh of the world he means the fabric of space, time, and movement within which we situate ourselves, constituted by the interrelation of the myriad bodies that exist within the world. However, it is not a substance or a stable, constitutive essence, by the fact that space, time, and movement are in constant intertwined processes. The largest field of flesh that we can perceive these relational processes is nature, since it is the largest living spatio-temporal context, atmosphere, or *Gestalt* of our existence and in which we are inevitably part of it and participate (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/ 1968).

Water reflects the qualities of Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" with its fluid, ever-changing qualities, and its integration to the fabric of space, time, and movement. Both "flesh" and water emphasize interconnectedness, embodying the idea of a medium that transcends and dissolves boundaries. Its fluidity, dynamism, and immersive nature can symbolize the reciprocal relationship between the perceiver and the world that Merleau-Ponty describes. It mediates between the perceiver and the world, acting as both a material substance and an experiential field that allows for profound engagement. Just as we are embodied in the "flesh" of the world, water surrounds, penetrates, unites and dissolves the elements it touches. The fluidity of water resonates with the continuous and inseparable relational processes between the perceiver and natural world. It flows, merges, and shifts the boundaries, much like how Merleau-Ponty views the perceiving body and the perceived world as intertwined, continuously influencing and reshaping each other. By applying Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" to water, we can perceive water not only as an element but as an active and integral participant in the Gestalt of our existence.

Within the studies of Edward Casey, who is currently working on the phenomenology of space and place, the elements reappear in relation with *topos* (place), the particular place of Being-in-the-world. He emphasises the importance of place which has remained in the background when compared to the notions of being, time and space. "Where we are . . . has everything to do with what and who we are" (Casey, 1993, xiii). He makes phenomenological analysis on the elements of water, air, rock and light through the landscape paintings and photographs which he calls placescapes. While studying water through landscapes, he defines it as "an opening that is the primary place for contemplation of the sublime" by its ability to reflect, absorb and exhibit light (Casey, 2002, 35). Moreover, water inherently carries a liminality in itself; by varying from tranquil waters to dramatic torrents. As a place it both has depths and surfaces; furthermore, it is found as a liminal zone between the volatile air and the solid earth. David Macauley highlights Casey's suggestion of water as an interplace for elements:

"Water is a middle field and medium between earth and sky. It becomes "the ultimate elemental mediatrix," the in-between and mediating place for elements. As Casey suggests, water often constitutes a kind of active

“interplace” and realm of elemental exchange, a point evident to Bachelard and Thoreau, who speaks of the lake as both the “earth’s eye” and as “sky water” (Macauley, 2010, 321).

Water as being liminal or ‘in between’ as Casey claims, does not fail to have a place, but rather it constitutes an interplace, “a uniquely mediatory place existing between its various co-elemental constituents” (Casey, 2002, 35). From a Heideggerian point of view, the liminality of water from which its relationality emerges, reveals its multiple meanings by reflecting, absorbing and exhibiting the realm of the other surrounding elements and nature within itself.

“In general, Continental philosophy has transitioned from a focus on distinct elements and theories of earth, air, fire, and water, as they were conceived or constructed in ancient Greek thought, to enlarged but still emerging accounts of the elemental” (Macauley, 2010, 324). Since earth, air, fire, and water enter to the cultural and creative area, where we try to grasp the deep sense or the epiphany of the world, the forgotten significances of elements disclose themselves through the spatio-temporal experience of the “lifeworld” of Husserl, the material imagination of Bachelard, the unity of the fourfold of Heidegger and Ponty’s element of Being, “flesh”. Traditionally, phenomenology has been understood as the study that questions the universal structures of consciousness and the intentional experience about objects. Therefore;

“Many suggest that this makes nature merely a correlate of consciousness, thus indicating that nature could not possibly be universal or structural. Others argue that this understanding of phenomenology embraces an anthropocentric viewpoint that undermines any intrinsic value of nature” (Donohoe, 2016, 1).

However, within these canonical and phenomenological approaches to nature, nature seems to be situated neither as a thing nor an object, but rather as the primordial background and horizon of all the possible phenomena and experience itself. The phenomenological perspective challenges and transcends the dualism between the human and the natural environment while questioning how we experience ‘being in the world’, the natural world, as a possibility to reevaluate, recycle and remember the

forgotten four elements of modern and human-centered worldview. From a broader perspective focused on the relationship between human experience and nature, these phenomenological philosophers pave a pathway to understand how water is not only a physical element but also a profound symbol of fluidity, transformation, and interconnectedness between human experience and the natural world.

As a further question, what if we shift our perspective from considering ‘being in the world’ to ‘being in flux’ since we are living in a ‘lifeworld’ that is itself subject to constant flux and “what if we were to change the element within which we think, and relinquish our parcels of conceptual ground in order to remain open to the element of water and its associated qualities of fluidity?” (Chiaroni, 2016, 108) Shifting from the notion of ‘being in the world’ to ‘being in flux’ invites a deeper encounter with the dynamic and fluid nature of existence. This perspective allows us to embrace the constant flux of the lifeworld, the transformative possibilities that water symbolizes. Water as an element is not only a metaphor of the fluid nature, but also a guiding element about how we perceive, experience and embrace the ever-transforming nature of the world.

Up until here, the text explored the earliest understandings of the four elements as the ruling principles within cosmology and philosophy and then their reemergence in phenomenological approaches as a way to move away from the stable hierarchical binaries of nature and human within the Enlightenment philosophies. In relation with the environmental discourses, the continental philosophy of the twentieth and twenty-first century creates a fresh perspective on the elemental world that surrounds us. Water, as a central element, exemplifies these transitions vividly, as it reflects the shift from the cosmological speculations of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, where it symbolized creation, flux, and primordial life, to the phenomenological emphasis on its experiential qualities (Macauley, 2010). Philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Luce Irigaray, emphasize these transitions from the primordial Pre-Socratic elements to the developing accounts of their phenomenal appearances as they are ever changing things-in-themselves, reframing water not merely as a passive element, but as a fluid, ever-changing entity that reflects critical notions of body, language, and space.

The post-structuralist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, recoin the term “rhizomata” to criticise the essentialist, hierarchical and tree-like (arborescent) concept of knowledge that explores the unchanging, original roots and sources of things. They invite us to re-read Empedocles’s rhizomata, -the four elements- in a non-essentialist way as they are actively open to transform their states and forms, and as they are “always already in the process of change, transition, and becoming, and in this regard at least they are more like the elements of Plato and Aristotle which undergo transformation” (Macauley, 2010, 134). Within the entirety of the philosophy of Deleuze, we see that multiplicity and fluidity have central positions, especially within his theory of becoming since he follows Heraclitus’s affirmation of being as becoming:

“...there is no being beyond becoming, nothing beyond multiplicity; neither multiplicity nor becoming are appearances or illusions. But neither are there multiple or eternal realities which would be, in turn, like essences beyond appearance. Multiplicity is the inseparable manifestation, essential transformation and constant symptom of unity. Multiplicity is the affirmation of unity; becoming is the affirmation of being” (Deleuze, 1983, 23-24).

Gilles Deleuze explores the concepts of multiplicity and fluidity, particularly through the metaphors of flux and becoming in his broader philosophical framework. His idea of becoming and his questioning of static, fixed concepts resonate with the fluid, ever-changing nature of water. He sees fluidity as symbolic for a world that is in constant becoming and transformation, where concepts, identities, and realities are always in motion, aligning with water’s inherent qualities of fluidity that acts as a metaphor for ever-becoming processes that shape both existence and thought. He emphasises water as part of his theory of becoming, as a solitary becoming-space in which the fluid state provides “a utopian space of free movement and development.in contrast to static forms of being, so that the fluid “conditions of emergence and transformation do not resemble conditions of being that are inherent to the nature of the solid” (LaFountain, 2016, 79). This conception highlights how water operates as both a material and metaphorical entity that resists static categorization, embodying liminality and fluidity, and positioning water as a site where boundaries dissolve.

Building on the association between fluidity and becoming by the philosopher Julia Kristeva, *chora*, described as the receptacle of the universe, the wet nurse of becoming precedes linguistic and symbolic forces that can be found within the language and society (Kristeva, 1974).

“It is the place where the speaking subject is both generated and negated. The supreme moments -of generation and negation, birth and death- are located within the maternal space of *chora*. The maternal body is the gateway between the semiotic and the symbolic. If the *chora* is the place of generation, it is also a place of disorder and death” (Adams, 1994, 21).

Chora as the inner, maternal, and fluid space that nurtures also *genesis*, the creation, carries the characteristics of water with its generative and negative forces. Kristeva’s maternal and fluid understanding of *chora*, that posits self in a fluidity within the cycle of generation and negation, calls for questioning the earthbound, rigid, and stable configuration of self within the former Western philosophies. Our corporeal ties to the element of water are beyond metaphorical and rather ontological as the self is furnished with the flesh that comes from the maternal fluid space, and as our bodies are two-thirds water that are in continuous process of transformation and exchange.

Michel Foucault, in his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces" discusses the concept of heterotopias. Since they exist between the familiar and the unknown, providing an area both for connection and separation, water-related spaces such as boats and ships with their ability for humans to explore beyond the borders and to imagine new possibilities, aligns with the concept of heterotopia. The concept of heterotopia (French: *hétérotopie*) refers to places that hold multiple layers of meaning or connections to other places beyond what is immediately obvious. Essentially, a heterotopia is a physical embodiment or simulation of a utopia, or an alternate space (such as a prison, asylum) that preserves undesirable elements to strengthen the existence of an ideal space in reality (Foucault, 1986). The heterotopias have both physical and symbolic aspects; and the boat as a heterotopian piece of space that floats on water, it is both closed in itself and also exposed to the infinity of the sea. Although the boat is a space related to civilisation as an instrument of economic development, it also allows experiences of adventure, freedom, and exploration which contrast with the boundaries

of land-based, civilised life. “The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates (Foucault, 1986, 27). Resonating with Deleuze’s emphasis of water as a fluid space for becoming, in the context of heterotopias, water represents a liminal space that bridges the ordered and rigid world of earth and the vast, profound possibilities of the sea, in between confinement and exploration of freedom and infinity.

The watery-spaces such as ships and boats, as heterotopias, navigate the tension between land-based civilization and the vast unknown infinity of the sea, much like the interdisciplinary approach of Blue Humanities. In the beginning of the 21st century, the term Blue Humanities started to be used by some scholars such as Steve Mentz and Elizabeth DeLoughrey as referencing an interdisciplinary field of study focusing on the ecological, cultural and historical significance of the blue hole, oceans and other bodies of water. It questions specifically the encounter of humans with water and how humans perceive, interact with and represent the watery environments. The Blue Humanities have grown out of the increasing recognition of the significance of water in shaping our experiences and sustainability as an urgent need to highlight the environmental challenges from a watery aspect.

The Blue Humanities focuses on the lack of knowledge about the depths of the oceans, and since this approach is concerned with shifting the focus from land-based perspective of historical and cultural narratives to sea-based perspectives. This way of thinking aligns with Timothy Morton’s idea of shifting the focus from human-centered perspectives and expanding our ecological recognition through concerns with non-human entities and systems like the ocean, which was once and then a blue hole. Morton does not specifically assert water as a hyperobject in his writings. However, the concept resonates with water as it is also a vast, distributed, complex and multi-dimensional spatial entity that transcends human perception just like hyperobjects. It exists across vast temporal and spatial scales in a way that makes it impossible for humans to fully comprehend and control. In 1951, -almost a century ago-, Rachel Carson, an American marine biologist claimed that humans would return to sea ‘mentally and imaginatively’ (Gillis, 2013). She was recalling the cultural turn to the sea that began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that was influenced by arts and literature. Fiction and artistic imagery were far beyond marine expeditions

and explorations. It is just like today, as we know more about the moon and Mars than the depths of the oceans. By this mystery, vastness and unfathomable depthness, waters that encapsulate life on earth have always been a source of the natural sublime, awe-inspiring and terrifying. However, through the perspective of seeing water as a hyperobject, it also occurs as a new kind of sublime, a speculative one. Since water and waterscapes are things that we encounter physically and immediately, they evoke both the Burkean and Kantian sublime. However, as water has an ever-present, ever-transforming, fluid, and unfathomable nature, its nonlocality and invisibility of its full scope makes its presence both intimate and alien, also recalling the speculative sublime of Morton. From Morton's perspective of hyperobjects, water as part of vast ecological systems with its ever-changing states whether as ocean, river, glacier, or atmospheric moisture, it has a sublime nature. As for Morton, climate change is a hyperobject, the rising sea levels, the melting of glaciers and the volatile weather events like floods and droughts can also be discussed as hyperobjects. These vast and distributed transformations make water both a symbol and a part of the broader environmental shifts that Morton highlights. This resonates with Morton's concept of the speculative sublime, as an intimate yet beyond human comprehension presence, as water is everywhere, but it is ungraspable in immediate perception. Its paradoxical role in ecological changes, as in some parts of the world scarcity threatens life, while in others, the possible floods threaten societies. Water's unpredictable and violent behaviours mirror the broaden unpredictability and the impossibility of full control and categorisation of ecological changes in the Anthropocene. With its interconnectedness and non-locality, it expands the limits of Burkean and Kantian sublime as it does not reside solely in human experience but also in the alien nature of how water and such vast entities present themselves.

The speculative dimension of water's sublime nature with its elusive character becomes a powerful inspiration for artists. Water, throughout the history of art, is often depicted not only as physical and immediate human encounter, but also as a symbol of the unfathomable, fluid, ever-transforming in its both alien and intimate, both familiar and unfamiliar totality. In the light of these, the next chapter will focus on the sublimity of water both as a symbol of nature's power that transcend human experience, as a medium of aesthetic contemplation, and as an entity whose fluid, vast and ungraspable nature expands our conception of the sublime.

Chapter 4

Tracing The Sublime in Waterscapes

The previous chapter focused on how water enabled the development of vital conditions and civilizations thanks to its anomalies and its unique properties. It retraced the pathway of water as a key cultural meaning throughout history and philosophy briefly. With short historical contexts related to several philosophical approaches on elements and nature, it examined how water turned mostly into a dominated resource within the Enlightenment period, and then how the experience and appearance of the element water has affected our imagination and consideration of both the natural and sensuous world. Water with its constant flux and fluid form finds its correspondence in the modern and contemporary era. In the modern era this correspondence has a negative connotation due to modernity's liquid and volatile structure, as well as its fixation on order and control, which contrasts profoundly with the unpredictable nature of fluidity. On the other hand, in post-modern and then contemporary era the restless, transformative and unstable form of water finds its resemblance in sociological and philosophical theories which resist the stable, earthbound conventions that dominate the language and stable structures.

Alongside its sociological, philosophical, and historical impacts, water has a major significance and influence in art. It inherently articulates a threshold, a liminality between generation and negation, the purifying and the violent, darkness and light, visible and invisible, volatile air and solid earth. It provides a matrix for the processes of becoming in between these complementary dualities. Therefore, water on earth, especially seawater, alongside ice and mist have a particular affinity to the term 'sublime' with its fluidity and formlessness carrying a wide range of liminality between these dualities.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between water and sublime, investigating how water as an elusive, fluid element embodying dualities, continues to evoke and transform the experience of sublime in art, –whether Kantian, Burkean, technological, or speculative– into a hybrid and multi-dimensional concept. While the sublime was classically represented in 18th and 19th century seascape paintings, the contemporary sublime in art has evolved with the advent of the visual technologies in different media such as photography, video-art and large-scale installations. Hiroshi

Sugimoto's photo-series *Seascapes* (1980-) that reflect on the infinite flow of time through the surface of water, Bill Viola's slow-motion video installation *Ascension* (2000) that immerses viewer in the existential flow between birth and death, and Anish Kapoor's large-scale installation *Descension* (2014) that recreates the dynamic and turbulent power of water, are exemplary artworks for understanding the evolvement of contemporary sublime since they all explore the ungraspable, fluid and awe-inspiring qualities of water, often associated with the sublime. These works that focus on waterscapes demonstrate how the sublime which was once related especially to seascape paintings has evolved with modern media and has transformed and intensified our experience of the sublime in between something both natural and technological. They are all canonical works that offer diverse experiences and approaches of sublime through focusing on water both through their materiality and conceptual framing. Sugimoto merges the ungraspable vastness and never-ending dynamic presence of water with photography's ability to carry a large span of time in a single image, while Viola immerses the viewer in a digitally altered temporality and space of water's unfathomable depthness. And finally, Anish Kapoor creates an infinite loop of a whirlpool in an abyss by blending water's unpredictable and annihilating qualities with a mechanical and technological precision of engineering. They all convey a sense of liminality; in between something both natural and technological, both generative and negative, both immanent and transcendent; which are all inherently related to water and the sublime simultaneously. Furthermore, these three works create a holistic approach to our encounter with water from diverse and unique vantage points: *Seascapes* locate us within, *Ascension* below and *Descension* above a waterscape. Together, they create a multi-perspectival and holistic approach that allows viewers to rethink their understanding and experience of water's sublime qualities.

I reconsider water not only as an element or a metaphor, but as an unfathomable, ungraspable dynamic zone on earth that materializes the conditions of sublimity. Sublime here, in this text is identified mostly with liminality and experiencing vulnerability and smallness in front of the ungraspable and unfathomable vastness and dynamism of water. These are the constant elements of the sense of the sublime that still exist profoundly. However, nature loses its position of being one of a kind, the only power that stimulates the sublime by the developing technologies that enable us

to manipulate nature. Furthermore, the transformation of the sublime is also closely tied to the evolving understandings of nature, time, space, and reality in today's world. The improvements in engineering and advanced visualisation technologies allowed humans to control, manipulate and simulate many aspects of nature and elements. Technological advancements introduced a challenge to the unique power of nature and therefore to the Romantic, classical understanding of the sublime. Technology's ability to control and manipulate nature becomes a newcomer that stimulates the contemporary sublime.

Alongside this shift from natural to technological sublime, the concept of the speculative sublime emerges, where the focus moves towards an engagement with the alien and ungraspable qualities of both the natural and technological phenomena. The speculative sublime focuses on our encounter with entities and forces that operate on vast spatial and temporal dimensions such as water with its autonomy that transcend human comprehension and control. Water as a sublime entity embodies both the immediacy of the experience and also the unseen, vast temporal and spatial dimensions that exceed human experience and understanding, resonating with the qualities of hyperobjects of Timothy Morton.

In the context of contemporary art, these new dimensions of the sublime influences artists to explore the relationship of nature and technology, by presenting water not just as a subject to be depicted but also as an entity that invokes awe through its infinite transformation, profound depths, and vast presence that cannot be fully grasped, even with modern technology.

While in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the traditional and common vessel for evoking visual sublimity was painting, today with the introduction of technology and the exploitation of the effect of images within mass culture, the sense of sublime is now expanding towards the immersive and large-scale installations, and cyberspaces that create a transformative experience. The Romantic, classical sublime positioned nature as one and only overwhelming and awe-inspiring power and generally resulted in quasi-static and two-dimensional landscape representations in art. Painting was indeed a technology that allowed artists to depict the vastness and ungraspability of nature. The use of perspective, different methods of painting the surface of canvas, and composition are advancements that enabled artists to create the sense of sublime. The Romantic seascapes of J.M.W. Turner and Caspar David

Friedrich evoke the sense of sublimity for the viewer, by using painting as a tool to convey the awe-inspiring power of nature. Although they are quasi-static and two-dimensional images, they carry the ability to push viewers towards an experience that is beyond rational thought and its limits by emphasizing the magnitude and dynamism of nature and the human's smallness and vulnerability in the face of a natural events. Through the use of dramatic colours, tones and composition they could evoke the timelessness and ungraspability of the sea, however, it was often presenting a moment that reminds nature's ever-transforming cycle that exceeds the immediate human experience. The technology of painting offers a moment of recognition of nature's power. Historically, all forms of art, from painting to sculpture to photography and video, have been mediated by technology in some way. According to this, art conveys the sense of sublime which is related to the vastness, immensity, and dynamism of nature, but also it is an evolving form of technological sublime, by which technology extends our ability to experience or present something that is beyond human comprehension.

The encounter of artistic expression with technological advancements allowed artists to transform the experience of time, space, and the sublime by creating vast, complex simulations of natural environments. Therefore, the transformative experience of the contemporary sublime differentiates itself from the classical conception of the sublime. The sublime which was once related to transcending the limits of time and space by means of reason now evolves in-between "the socially-constructed and alienating reality, and the unmediated awareness of life" (Morley, 2010, 4). It creates a new kind of immanent transcendence. The triggering source of sublimity has expanded its field towards an interplay between the natural and the constructed. It manifests itself in the interplay between the technologically constructed realities of life and the moments of direct, unmediated awareness. The sublime becomes experienced within the combination of the immediacy of human life, technology, and art, in a gray area of artificial structures and the raw essence of existence. According to Morley, in the contemporary era, the sublime was transformed with the advancements of modern technology such as digital media, virtual reality and immersive installations. These advancements in technology transformed the sublime experience through not only representing nature but also immersing viewers in a space where reality and artifice blend. Unlike the classical sublime that occurs during the

viewer's distant encounter with the painted natural scene, the contemporary sublime has shifted towards a participatory experience that happens in the here and now, engaging with more senses, transforming the perception of time and space. The viewer engages with the immediate sense of presence in the current reality, while also transcending somewhere beyond. The sublime occurs not only with contemplating and awe-inspiring scenes, but with a multi-dimensional, multi-sensorial and immersive experience. This shift in experiencing the sublime is also related to the changing understanding of representation in our current era. Today, the distance between the observer and the observed, the active and passive spectatorship has dissolved. The viewer is no longer just a passive observer but is also drawn in to the work in a way that becoming a part of it. This transformation allowed by the innovative technologies in art and media, redefines the boundaries of experiencing art. Contemporary art often draws the viewer into the narrative or the medium, encouraging an active participation and immersion rather than a mere identification and observation from a distance. This participatory experience transforms the sublime into a more direct, lived experience, dissolving the boundary between the artworks and the viewer.

This immanent sublime allows the viewer to experience the awe and astonishment within the current reality which is a liminal area in between technologically and socially mediated but also unmediated as the raw essence of existence.

Therefore, the advancements in technology bring a temporal and spatial transformation to the experience of sublime. It transforms the experience of time and space by inserting new kinds of constructed natural scenes and different flows of time.

The technologically enhanced and immersive works on nature, do not only simulate and transform the experience of nature but emphasize the alien and uncontrollable nature of hyperobjects. By presenting and creating hyperreal and vast natural environments, artists create experiences where the boundaries between constructed and natural, known and unknown, get blurred. They invite the spectator into a liminal field that feels both immediately present and unmediated and also ungraspable and incomprehensible. This liminality where the sublime occurs also introduces a layer of the speculative sublime. The experience of the viewer in the blend of nature, technology and artistic expression becomes close to feeling awe and astonishment not only from what is immediately present, but also from contemplating

the mysterious, alien, and elusive power beyond the here and now. Such works invite viewers to encounter the alien nature of both natural and technological vast systems that transcend human recognition and experience.

Since the thesis focuses on the sublime and its profound relationship with water in art, it traces the pathway of the transformation of the classical sublime towards contemporary understandings of the sublime via waterscapes from three different artists that are working with different media from the contemporary era. The thesis asserts that water is not simply a subject or medium in these artworks. It focuses on how water articulates the conditions of the sense of the sublime by filling the spaces with its fluidity and creating a liminality between generation and negation, the purifying and the violent, darkness and light, visible and invisible, volatile air and solid earth. Furthermore, it explores how the advancements in technology in art transform the experience of the sublime within waterscapes. With these dualities, waterscapes stimulate their own sublimity whether in the classical, technological, and speculative sense, by evoking astonishment and awe at the same time, and by challenging human comprehension in front of water's powerful dynamism and ungraspability.

The analysis of waterscapes of three contemporary artists, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Bill Viola, and Anish Kapoor, will serve to convey three different forms of the technological watery sublime. In these contemporary works, the theme of water and its relationship to the sublime appears in its varying forms. In Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes* water appears as an element that creates the horizon line but in a quasi-abstract visual style that challenges one's finite rational nature in front of the limitlessness of the ocean's horizon. Bill Viola uses water as a fluid space that gives rise both to generation and negation and reminds Plato's chora *-khora-*, the matrix for the processes of becoming in between life and death. Anish Kapoor uses water to create large artificial whirlpools that replace the natural sublime with the technological sublime. They are all canonical examples for creating their own sublimity both in the classical and contemporary sense, by the limit-pushing uses of their own time and media. To understand various aspects of the watery sublime in contemporary art, the following chapters will provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the specific properties of the medium, the content, the viewer's experience, and the historical context of the artworks. It questions how the sublimity of water became materialized and transformed through the use of different media in waterscapes.

4.1 -Scapes

The word *-scape*, defined as “a combining form extracted from landscape, refers to ‘an extensive view, scenery,’ or ‘a picture or representation’ of such a view, as specified by the initial element:” such as landscape, seascape, waterscape (Dictionary.com, 2021). Landscape is one of the major subjects in both the history of art and contemporary art, it embodies a “spiritual and aesthetic response to nature.as a product of natural forces. Perhaps altered by human intervention including “its materiality, the process of its shaping” (Elkins, 2011, 90). In Danish *Skabe* and in German *schaffen* means “to shape”, and the suffixes *-skab* and *-schaft*, as in the English *-ship* also mean association, partnership. So, “there is a notion, embedded in the original word, of a mutual shaping of people and place: place shapes the land, and the land shapes people” (Whistorn-Spirn, 2008, 92).

Therefore, in all *-scapes*, there is a crucial and interrelated relationship between the physical features of a place and the people. Both literally and artistically, people shape the scapes, and the scapes shape the experiences of the people in different ways through time and technology. This understanding of *-scapes* resonates both with the encounter of human and nature, and the subsequent analysis of how contemporary artworks with different media engage with the sublime in waterscapes.

Up until the 17th century, landscape was generally depicted as the background, the setting for storytelling. In the 17th century, landscape emerged as an autonomous genre and became a major subject during the 19th century. With the encounter of Italian and Flemish artists in the second half of the 16th century and with French painters such as Nicolas Poussin, Gaspard Dughet and Claude Gellée, the genre started to rise as a sublime artistic subject. By the late 18th century, the rise of Romanticism shifted the focus towards the depictions of the sublimity of nature, emphasising the interconnectedness of earth, air, fire, and water within a spiritual and romantic framework. Landscape evolved to include “as much sea as land, and as much culture as nature” (Olwig, 2011, 162). To the natural formation of earth and landscape, water is crucially integral to the process.

As a primordial element for the phenomenological experience of landscape, water becomes essential with its qualities such as fluidity, reflectivity, and purity that create its sound, motion, and visual qualities. By means of such qualities it creates its

own centrality to a wide range of aesthetic and cultural discourses in landscapes. By the first decades of the 19th century, seascape took place as a subgenre of landscape and made water play a major role within landscape paintings, even if not in other media like drawing or sculpture. This shift paved the pathway for later artistic explorations of water, encouraging contemporary interpretations that engage with new forms of the sublime.

This was one account of the sea's restless energy and comparative unboundedness, which enabled it to function as a metaphor for Nature as a whole, and more specifically to evoke the aesthetic sensation of sublimity, an ultimately religious sense of man's smallness in the face of Nature's power. Because of the task in hand, the sea tended to be represented in paintings of the Romantic era more in terms of its forceful and stormy aspects, and with some vessel that allowed a fragile human presence to be introduced as a counterpoint (Clarke, 2012, 37).

The sea is an area for artistic contemplation with its serenity, unfathomable and mysterious depths on the view and with the unceasing sound that veils all other sounds. Yet, with its ever-transforming flow and powerful turbulence it carries uncontrollableness and uncertainty at the same time. With this dual characteristic, in the confrontation of the sea and humans, it creates a challenging relationship that makes humans both fragile and small in front of nature, but also it evokes the desire of controlling this untameable, unbounded fluid space of water. Artists, by recreating the vastness and vagueness of the sea in two- or three-dimensional surfaces, fulfil the desire of controlling nature from the comfort and distant area while still reminding the experience of awe and terror.

Towards the 19th century, the sublime takes hold as an aesthetic concept across Europe. The sublime becomes a prominent issue with the Romantic reaction against Rationalism and the rise of landscape painting as a major subject in art. In Germany, especially with the influence of the philosophy Burke and Kant, the artists, writers and composers adopted the sublime; especially two leading artists Joseph Mallord William Turner (175-1851) and Caspar David Friedrich (174-1840) made unique contributions

to the emergence of sublime seascape paintings in the Romantic era, showing the dual nature of water, depicting its both generative, serene qualities but also its volatility and destructive power.

Alongside them, painters such as John Constable (1776-1837), Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875), Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Andreas Achenbach (1815-1910), Knud Baade (1808-1879) also engaged with the emerging exploration of nature and sublime through seascapes. Their works depicted water not just as a source of beauty, but also as a destructive power.



Figure 1. Clearing Up-Coast of Sicily by Andreas Achenbach, 1847, [Oil on canvas].



Figure 2. *The Wreck* by Knud Baade, 1830s–1840s, [Oil painting]. Victoria and Albert Museum.

The Romantic era often depicted the sea as a powerful and dynamic power with its turbulent motions, working as a metaphor for nature's uncontrollable vastness. However, a painting of Caspar David Friedrich, *The Sea of Ice* (1824-25), also known as *The Wreck Of Hope* stands apart from the turbulent waved seascapes of his time. His seascapes generally depict water in a variety of ways; he usually includes elements such as shipwrecks as human encounters with nature, rocks as isolated formations in water and figures standing against the vast expanses of the ocean. With the consistent use of these elements, Friedrich's seascapes convey a contemplative, dramatic mood and a sense of awe and wonder in front of the power of nature.

The seascapes of Joseph Mallord William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich become the most canonical artworks for evoking the sense of nature's sublimity and the smallness of humans in the face of nature with their engaging aesthetic and spiritual values. As a leading figure of the Romantic movement of late 18th and 19th centuries, Turner saw and depicted the world as a never-ending state of flux. His engagement with the Romantic theme of stormy sea and storm-tossed boat, introduces the restless

energy of water, its turbulent and strong aspects, and the smallness of human presence in the face of nature.



*Figure 3. The Sea of Ice by Caspar David Friedrich, 1823–1824, [Painting].
Kunsthalle Hamburg.*

He uses marine painting and the depiction of water with its restless energy and unboundedness in a way that makes water function as a metaphor for nature's sublimity as a whole (Clarke, 2010, 36). Meanwhile, in most of Friedrich's seascape paintings that focus on the silent, slow, and merciless power of nature, the theme of sublime is conveyed in a more contemplative and quiet manner. Unlike Turner's seascapes, Friedrich's paintings mostly avoid the turbulent, strong and dramatic aspects of the sea, "but shares with them the theme of human endeavor being dwarfed by the power of nature" (Clarke, 2010, 43).¹

At first glance, as one of the most famous polar paintings, Friedrich's *The Sea Of Ice* (1824-25), -also known as *The Wreck Of Hope*- is a quasi-documentarial painting inspired by the explorer William Parry's Northwest Passage expedition in 1819–20. Known as a German Romantic, Friedrich first exhibited the painting at the

Prague Academy in 1824 under the title *An Idealized Scene of an Arctic Sea, with a Wrecked Ship on the Heaped Masses of Ice*. Instead of the spectacle of storm-tossed waves of Turner, 'the quiet but inexorable power of ice' as a state of water is a crucial motif that is found in Friedrich's silent but powerful watery paintings (Clarke, 2010, 43).

Arctic expeditions, by their very nature, convey the experience of sublime for humans confronted with the endless and harsh surfaces of tundra and immense glaciers. Although seascapes are generally related with the Kantian dynamic sublime, the sublime in the canonical Arctic depiction of Caspar David Friedrich, is a quasi-different one which is close to OOO's speculative sublime, more than the catastrophic watery paintings. Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice* lacks the tension of Kant's dynamic sublime. As he does not depict how humans experience the dramatic, dwarfing event of the stormy and volatile waves, but the silence, timelessness, and indifference of the sea with the lack of humans, the work aligns with the speculative sublime. Although it is symbolically a representation of the confrontation of human with nature, it also signals the interaction between objects themselves. "Friedrich's painting carries out a kind of refocusing on nature. Swallowed by ice, the ship itself is barely visible, whereas the stacked blocks of ice physically dominate the center of the composition. Or more precisely, the image shows the fragmentation of a ship whose debris mingles with natural forms" (Cahen-Maurel, 2014). It invites the viewer to speculate on how the boat, the glaciers and the remnants interact with each other in the infinite cycle of nature. Therefore, here the sublime does not occur only as an emotional human response, but also as a recognition of the interactions between vast entities and objects that transcend human perception.

"For what strikes one above all in this painting is the impression of silence and stillness—it almost emanates a sense of tranquillity. The sublime experience resides in a quiet and oneiric vision of a natural time, a cosmic and archaic time that is opposed to the time of history and action, a natural time in its fundamental processes: the solidification of water into ice, or the petrification of the ice in the foreground that gradually takes on the colour of stone. This elementary matter is marked and borne by the temporality of its becoming. Yet it is a slow, infinitesimal movement that borders upon

immobility, if not upon eternity—the movement of a sea of ice” (Cahen-Maurel, 2014, 11).

The sublimity in the movement of the sea of ice triggers the viewer within the encounter with the dynamism and vastness of the powerful natural phenomena. It enables an experience for the viewer that transcends the limitations of time and the self beyond the actual flow of time of the everyday world. It indicates a glimpse of the sense of timelessness and the never-ending flow of becoming. The depiction of water both as a subject and a metaphor in art has long been related to the seascapes, in which the focus was mostly on representing the ocean as an overwhelming and awe-inspiring power, emphasizing its sublimity. However, as the encounter and engagement with water transformed, the concept of waterscapes expanded beyond traditional seascapes and started to include various approaches that question water’s more subtle and multi-dimensional aspects. This expansion of waterscapes coincided with the art scene’s evolution that pushed its boundaries beyond traditional genres towards broader and more conceptual approaches. Water became a crucial subject, material and medium for expressing the sublime in many new and complex ways, including modern and contemporary ideas and practices. While Romantic depictions of water focused more on its ungraspable power and unpredictability, modern art expanded the exploration of the relationship between water and sublime by incorporating new perspectives that emphasize both the psychological and meditative aspects of the human encounter.

By the 20th century, artists were influenced by movements like Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism and explored the sublime as an internal state alongside as an encounter with nature’s ungraspable presence. Influenced by these movements, artists have continued to engage with the sublime, by using water as a central theme to explore its vast and elusive qualities. Through a wide range of media and approaches, artists have focused on water’s physical and symbolic characteristics. The following works exemplify how they use water as a powerful subject, media and material, offering reflections on how we perceive and experience water at the intersection of art and the sublime.

The paintings of Mark Rothko (1903-1970) with large, abstract fields of colours evoke a sense of immersion and the infinity of space which resonates with the

sublimity of water, inviting the viewer into a liminal space between being and nothingness with a state of contemplation and transcendence.



Figure 4. Mark Rothko, *Blue, Green, and Brown*, 1952. Oil on canvas. Private collection. © Mark Rothko.

His paintings with fields of colour offer an experience that is no longer a direct encounter with overwhelming dynamic and vast natural forces but instead a confrontation with the unrepresentable, which creates the basis for Lyotard's concept of the sublime. It leaves the viewers with an ambiguous sense of infinity and transcendence. Resonating with Lyotard's concept of sublime, which is profoundly related to the unrepresentable, Helen Frankenthaler's (1928-2011) abstract paintings where she used thinned paint that flowed on the surface of the canvas, recalls the fluid and unpredictable nature of water.

The conceptual artist Hans Haacke (1936), in his *Condensation Cube* (1963-65) uses water as an element in a never-ending cycle of evaporation and condensation, in a way that evokes the sublime through its infinite movement and transformation. It presents a kind of speculative sublime, where the natural processes are blended with an ecological understanding and an ungraspable and never-ending cycle of nature beyond human perception.

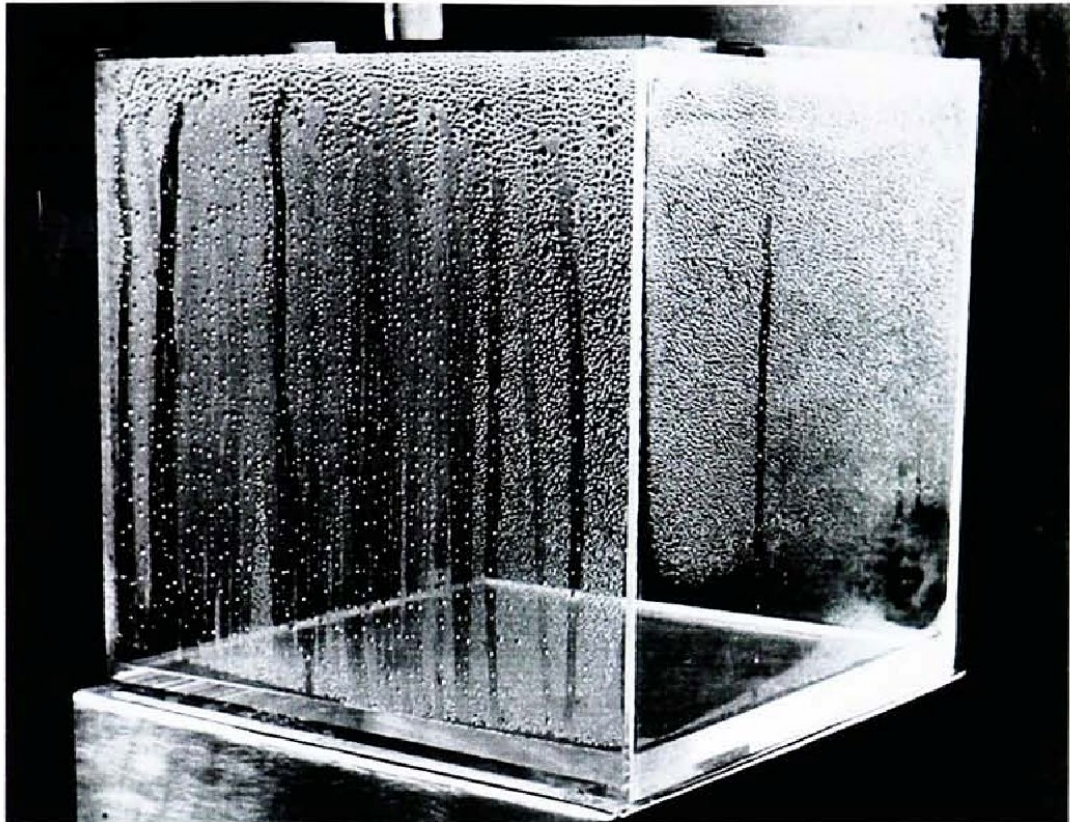


Figure 5. Hans Haacke, *Condensation Cube*, 1963. Plexiglass, distilled water.

Collection Wulf Herzogenrath, Bremen.

Robert Smithson's (1938-1973) land art piece *Spiral Jetty* (1970) stands as a crucial work that still exists in the Great Salt Lake, directly interacting with water's infinite tidal movements, embodying the characteristics of water like fluidity and ungraspability. The dynamic interaction between a human-made spiral and the vast unpredictable lake evokes a sense of sublime with an emphasis on the untameable and infinite cycles of water. It evokes both the Burkean sublime with its vastness, formlessness, and unpredictability of nature and also Morton's speculative sublime by its temporal and spatial vastness that is impossible to experience immediately.

Towards the contemporary era, artists like Maya Lin, Roni Horn, and Olafur Eliasson have created immersive installations that explore the dynamic and ungraspable nature of water. The architect and sculptor Maya Lin's (1959) works such as *Storm King Wavefield* and *Flow, Dew Point* and *Pin River—Hudson* explore the formlessness, fluidity, and infinite qualities of water through transforming simple materials into large-scale immersive forms reflecting the sublime qualities of water. She invites the viewer to experience a liminality in between the immanent and immediate, and the transcendent and ungraspable. Roni Horn's (1955) one of the crucial works that is based on water and its perception, the *Library of Water* (2007) in which she collects and creates an archive of water samples from different geographic locations in Iceland, engaging with the sublime both naturally and ecologically through installing refractive glass columns containing glacier waters.



Figure 6. Roni Horn, *Water, Selected*, from *Library of Water*, 2003–2007. © Roni Horn, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Stefan Altenburger.

She invites viewers to encounter the vastness and fragility of water in the exhibition space with an interplay of light, water, text, and transparency of the glass and reminds of the never-ending transformation of water. Although Olafur Eliasson

avoids using the term sublime when labelling his works, his works like the *Waterfall* (2016) reimagine nature's grandiosity through large-scale installations with meticulous engineering methods.



Figure 7. Olafur Eliasson, *Waterfall*, 2016. Crane, water, stainless steel, pump system, hose, ballast. Installation view at Château de Versailles, Versailles, France.

© Olafur Eliasson.

Aligning with Simon Morley's contemporary sublime, the *Waterfall* invites viewers to encounter watery sublime within a realm that includes both nature, human intervention, and technology. Thus, it transforms the sublime into a reflection of the interplay of human, nature and technology in reimagining and reshaping nature.

These examples of waterscapes from The Romantic period to the modern and contemporary era, serves not just as a subject and metaphor but also as a pathway to explore the varying and evolving approaches to sublime, ranging from the powerful and dynamic to the serene and contemplative aspects. These works paved the way for artists like Hiroshi Sugimoto, Bill Viola, and Anish Kapoor, who create canonical works that push the boundaries of how the sublime is understood and experienced through the combination of water, technology and artistic expression.

The transformation of the sublime can be traced through the crucial shift from its background rooted mainly in Romanticism, where it was profoundly tied to the awe-inspiring and overwhelming aspects of nature, to its contemporary understandings that expand its boundaries towards human-made and technological phenomena. This transformation signals a breaking point where the sublime is no longer confined to nature's overwhelming power but is shifted towards the threshold between the natural and technological, reflecting human's encounter with nature and its growing ability to mediate, simulate and reimagine the sublime experience in complex ways.



4.2 Hiroshi Sugimoto *Seascapes*



Figure 8. Photograph of Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Time Machine* exhibition at Hayward Gallery, 2024. Taken by Begüm Yamanlar.

Hiroshi Sugimoto (1948) is a Japanese photographer who is known for his photographic practice that uses the camera as a tool like time machine that captures and stores the temporal essence of his subjects, whether a seascape, a theater or an architectural space. As a Japanese photographer who lives both in Tokyo and New York, his way of creating images has been influenced by a variety of cultural and philosophical sources, including Buddhism and Eastern philosophies. In his body of works, the influences of the Buddhist cosmological doctrine Five Universals: the elements of earth, water, fire, wind and emptiness are the repetitive constituents (Sugimoto, n.d.). Alongside these, the passage of time, the permanence beneath the transient essence of things, the endlessness and vastness of nature and the sublime are the key elements in his works since Sugimoto as a photographer is a 'witnesser' of the world.

After studying Shintoism in the 1970s, -an Ancient Japanese religion that regards natural elements as divine and the power of nature as something beyond human control- he starts to photograph oceans (Schou, 2022). One of his canonical and ongoing series, *Seascapes* begun in 1980, consists of hundreds of photographs, all in black and white, all in the same production, framing and materials. Each photograph

is taken with a 19th century style large format camera with 8x10 black and white film and printed on double-weight gelatin silver paper, which adds a timeless quality to the images, relating the historical photographic traditions with contemporary conceptual inquiries. The theme of repetition in the series continues in many aspects, from the production process to the presentation and exhibition of the images. All of the images capture the serenity of the horizon without any man-made objects or places. With a minimalist approach, he eliminates all other-than natural elements and includes only the three elements of the horizon: light, water and air. The horizon is placed in the middle of each photograph in a way that creates two equal rectangles as sea in the bottom half and sky at the top. By placing the horizon in the middle of water and air, he remarks on an interplace, a mediatory place that exists in between its constituents in every photograph of the series. Alongside these similarities in between the images and their compositions, there are some distinctions that make the series a kind of sea variations. While, in some of the photographs we see some movements on the surface of water, some of the photographs lack any movement. While some photographs indicate a foggy and hazy sky with a vague horizon and soft tonalities, some indicate a very sharp and clear horizon with high tonal contrasts. The differences between the tonal ranges and the variety of sharpness and blurriness in the seascapes indicate that the artist intentionally embraces the spontaneity of environmental conditions. As a body of work with more than two hundred seascapes, it conveys the sense of chance, flux and the never-ending movement of water, air and atmospheric conditions. He combines the intentional artistic process with the continuously changing and cycling processes of nature in a way that explores the concepts of time, the permanent transience and sublime.



Figure 9. North Pacific Ocean, Stinson Beach, 1994 by Hiroshi Sugimoto, [Gelatin silver print]. In *Seascapes* series. © Hiroshi Sugimoto.

4.2.1 Photography and temporality: long exposure and transience of time.

Most of the images in the series are long-exposure photographs that depict the immensity of the ever-changing nature of water and air while the minority of the photographs are taken in shorter time periods and capture the dynamic and powerful nature of the sea.

He uses photography as his main medium and his time machine that can make the viewer travel back to the past and confront the present and future since he explores the permanence behind the transient essence of his subjects. “Photography is a system of saving memories. It is a time machine, in a way, to preserve the memory, to preserve time.” (Sugimoto, n.d.) In his *Seascapes* series, he goes beyond the limits of traditional understanding of photography that stores the subjects as if they are static and frozen moments of time. Conventionally and theoretically photography was regarded as a cut into time, a brief moment sorted through actual reality (Kracauer, 1960). However, Sugimoto transcends this notion of photography as a frozen moment in time as he captures the permanent transience of time in his long exposure photographs. Since time is an integral part as a dimension that is transcended while experiencing sublimity, it is a crucial aspect that needs to be addressed in *Seascapes* of Sugimoto. The seascapes,

-with exposure times ranging from several minutes to several hours-, with smooth and blurry vast fields of water emphasize an eternal presence of the constant flow of nature. By disrupting the instantaneity of the photographic practice that captures and freezes a moment from time, he confronts the viewer with philosophical issues about time and space. By exposing the flow and movement of water on the surface of the ocean, he explores time as an ongoing, never-ending duration as if it is something both permanent but also transient. Therefore, he exceeds the limits of the scientific notion of time and visualizes a preserved duration. The permanence of the transcendence of the flowing time becomes visible within the blurry and vast fields of the horizons of the oceans. By rendering visible the prolonged exposure times, he contemplates on the integrity of duration and exemplifies Gilles Henri Bergson's concept duration (*durée*) and Deleuze's accounts on duration and time-image.

Bergson compares and contrasts different notions of time in *Matter and Memory* (1896); duration (*durée*) as the lived, subjective experience of time, which is continuous and indivisible and the spatialized, divisible notion of mathematical time (Bergson, 1896/ 1991). The duration is an internal and flowing reality of time, which cannot be fully grasped by physical or spatial measures. Instead of freezing or capturing a single moment, *Seascapes* presents a duration that is flowing and indivisible, as a continuous presence that aligns with Bergson's *durée*. Although Deleuze's accounts on duration and time-image are attributed mostly to cinema; photography, especially long-exposure photography is highly related with the preservation of duration as much as cinema. The long-exposure photographs from a large span of time and from different locations around the world, preserve not just a moment but an entire duration. It is not only capturing a continuous expanse, but more a temporal essence of the continuum, it is the continuity of duration, where the depthness belongs to time more than space. This conception of time aligns with the Deleuzian time-image in which the duration, the span of time that embodies both the passage of becoming and the permanent presence of the ocean (Deleuze, 1985/1995). The combination of the temporal and spatial vastness of the ocean and the ability of photography to capture a span of time in a single image, works like a time capsule or a memory of the world that embodies both the permanence and transience at the same time. These seascapes include a preserved fluidity and continuity of water, linking

each horizon and ocean as if creating an atlas of the world's memory, which is both permanent, transient, and ever transforming.

The extended duration of exposure reveals a flow that is imperceptible for the naked eye, suggesting a continuous, uncontrollable movement beneath the surface of water and the volatile air. This interplay between stillness and flux is related deeply to the concept of the sublime, where the ungraspable and overwhelming nature of time evokes awe. Therefore, the series aligns with the sublime. While confronting the viewers with the vastness and immensity of forces beyond human control, it merges the temporal and the infinite.



Figure 10. Four seascapes from Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes* series. [Gelatine silver prints]. © Hiroshi Sugimoto.

4.2.2 Liminality and the sublime in *seascapes*. Sugimoto photographs the line between water and air, the sea-level horizon in a quasi-abstract and picturesque manner. Although the repetition and simplicity in the photographs creates a meditative and contemplative approach to water, through the repetitive documentation of the sea-level horizon worldwide -ranging from Cliffs of Moher to the Arctic Ocean, to the

Black Sea et al.- it invites the viewer to the fluidity and vastness of waterscapes. “Water and air. So very commonplace are these substances, they hardly attract attention—and yet they vouchsafe our very existence” (Sugimoto, n.d.). With the more atmospheric and foggy waterscapes, he transforms the Kantian dynamic sublime of water by creating a non-figurative, quasi abstract, serene scenes that reminds one’s “own finite rational nature in opposition to the infinite and unknown” (Crowther, 1984, 56). Sublime is related both to objects that have form and to those which are formless. Kant focuses on the latter. By its very nature, water is inherently formless since it takes its form from its container. In Sugimoto’s *Seascapes*, there is an utter lack of anything that can be defined with a particular form with finite limits that are visible to the spectator. We see a sheer liminality, immensity, and limitlessness in the in-betweenness of the volatile air and water, which makes our imagination and recognition strive to progress towards its own immensity in the Kantian sense. In the perceptual encounter with *Seascapes* of Sugimoto, one challenges her/his finite rationality in opposition to the infinity and limitlessness.

In the series that depicts the minimalist, vast, empty horizons, the sea, and sky stretch on endlessly in a way that creates the sense of vastness and infiniteness of nature. Therefore, the sublimity of the waterscapes exists in a quasi- different way from the Romantic seascapes that depict the turbulent and storm-tossed waves. While in most of the seascapes of Romantic painters such as Turner, Baade, Achenbach and Aivazovsky the sublimity of water is depicted as an astonishing but dwarfing, dynamic power that humans encounter, in *Seascapes* of Sugimoto, its sublimity comes from its depthness, complexity and darkness. The dark and quasi-abstract, blurry depictions of the watery spaces from all over the world convey the sense of the unknown. While referencing the overwhelming and contemplative aspects of water, they also carry the sense of awe and fear regarding the obscure and unknown aspects of the depths of vast seascapes. Therefore, the sublime experience occurs in a more quiet and immense manner like Friedrich’s *The Sea of Ice*. While Friedrich’s painting represents a more dramatic scene with a shipwreck that references an already happened human encounter with the power of nature, Sugimoto’s serene and silent photographs refer to the vastness and mysteriousness of water as a possible, mysterious, and unknown encounter. And, obviously, the two artist’s differences in the style and medium create distinctive emotional expressions and aesthetic qualities. However, in both artworks,

the sublime experience takes its reference from transcending the limitations of the actual flow of time of everyday life. They both remind the timelessness and the never-ending flow of nature as an infinite cycle of nature's essence, becoming. There is also a resemblance with Mark Rothko's 'dark paintings' with large, abstract fields of black and white tones that serve to mediate a liminal space between being and nothingness. Sugimoto claims,

“For several decades I have created seascapes. Not depicting the world in photographs, I'd like to think, but rather projecting my internal seascapes onto the canvas of the world. Skies now forming bright rectangles, water now melting into dark fluid rectangles. I sometimes think I see a dark horizon cutting across Mark Rothko's paintings. It's then I unconsciously realize that paintings are more truthful than photographs and photographs are more illusory than paintings” (Sugimoto, 2012).



Figure 11. Untitled by Mark Rothko, 1969, [Acrylic on canvas].

By focusing on the relationship between *Seascapes* and the paintings of Mark Rothko, he emphasizes their mutual interest in expressing their own subjective reality rather than a mere representation of physical reality. By hierarchically locating

painting as a more truthful medium than photograph, he actually indicates a more crucial statement in terms of the understanding of reality. He favours the artist's own expression and creation as more truthful than capturing and freezing a real moment in a representational way. For him, the truth reveals itself by transcending the mere representation of the daily experience of time and space. By this approach that blurs the limits of representation and embraces ambiguity and infinity, Sugimoto's *Seascapes* aligns with Lyotard's notion of sublime as they are neither naturalistic nor abstract and resist categorisation and resolution. Even though he uses a definitive name for the series and explicit captions for each image, the reduction of each image into two bands of different tonal ranges, the void of the horizon evokes the sense of the unrepresentable, making visible the limits of representation. It leaves the viewer with quasi-abstract images that conveys liminality between the presentable and unrepresentable. Alongside highlighting the limits of representation, the series opens a pathway for exploring profound existential questions in between dualities.

Seascapes, conveys a deep exploration of dualities such as generation and negation, the purifying and the violent, darkness and light which are related to the concept sublime. Each image of the series contains a vast emptiness that signals the grandiosity and infiniteness of the horizon. It invites the viewer to experience an awe-inspiring power that shapes the natural world. Furthermore, it offers the question of how the element water has affected our imagination and consideration of the natural world and its relation to the sensuous world. As the natural mirror of nature, it offers us a kind of self-contemplation and imagination.

The quasi-abstract photographs, divided into light and darkness, subtly signify the dynamic interplay between the generative power of the sea and its negating force. The interplay between generation and negation intricately is visible in the interplay of lightness and darkness, furthermore in the whole body of the artworks as the opposition between blurry long exposure seascapes and the serene ones. Although these seascapes are uniformal, large-format photographs of the sea in which the point of view stretches toward the horizon, each image differs formally from others by the duration of exposure, time of day and weatherly, atmospheric conditions.



*Figure 12. Lake Superior, Eagle River, 2003 by Hiroshi Sugimoto, [Gelatin silver print]. In *Seascapes* series. © Hiroshi Sugimoto.*

The blurry long exposure seascapes, with obscure and abstract details can be interpreted as embodying the destructive, annihilative power of the sea. By purposefully blurring the waves and the horizon, Sugimoto transcends the traditional seascape photography towards a pictorial formal quality. This purposeful negation of accurate details invokes a sense of dissolution, grasping the sea's restless, destructive force. The blurry lines, the obscure vast spaces and the lack of clear forms in the images contribute to an aesthetic that reminds the turbulent and transformative nature of the sea, highlighting its violent capacity for dissolution and negation.

On the other hand, the serene seascapes, with accurate and clear details of waves and horizon, reminds the generative and purifying power of the sea.

By intentionally blurring the waves and the horizon, he challenges traditional landscape photography by creating a pictorial and formal quality. The intentional blurriness of accurate details of the seascape also invokes a kind of speculative sublime. By deliberately obscuring the horizon and the details of the waves, they

present a vision of the sea that transcends the immediate and actual experience of the Kantian and Burkean sublime. The blurring of forms of the waves and the horizon suggests the alien nature of the ocean as an entity that cannot be fully understood or experienced immediately. Therefore, it resonates with the speculative sublime by evoking a sense of awe and terror not just at what is observable, but more at the unknown forces that lie beyond human recognition.

These seascapes as a whole series, also align with the concept of the hyperobject of Timothy Morton, with their nonlocality and invisibility. The seascapes of Sugimoto with their vastness and timelessness operate as hyperobjects as they exceed any human's ability to experience it fully. The blurriness of the accurate details serves as a metaphor of ungraspable grandiosity, never-ending motion and the cyclical transformations that unfold in an infinite period of time. The ungraspability of time and space that transcends the immediate human experience reminds us of the alien nature of the ocean as it operates independently of our recognition and control with its overwhelming presence.

On the other hand, the serene seascapes with accurate details that present clear horizons, and distinct waves evoke the speculative sublime from a different perspective. At first sight these seascapes with an obvious sharpness, clarity and precision of the image might initially seem like they align only with the classical notions of sublime; however, when considered from the speculative sublime aspect we may read it as if they reveal the infinite and timeless process of nature clearly. Despite their obvious clarity and precision, the grandiosity of both the content and the scale of the prints they signal the incomprehensibility of nature. The distinctive horizon line, the visible details of the waves only show a part of the vastness of the ocean, just like our actual experience of oceans. These seascapes, remind the nonlocality of oceans since they do not exist in one specific place but are spread out in a way that they are only partially perceivable to humans. In Morton's hyperobjects theory, the hyperobjects operate on periods that exceed the immediate human experience and human lifespan, in a way that makes them almost impossible to fully comprehend (Morton, 2020). The ocean with its never-ending cycles of transformation and fluidity, exists on such an infinite temporal scale that challenges our comprehension of time. In Sugimoto's accurate seascapes, this concept is subtly presented through the serenity and timelessness. Although the precision and sharpness of the works contrasts with the

knowledge that the ocean's existence spans geological timescales far beyond the human experience, the illusion of the stability of the photographs challenges the viewer's mind. It invites the viewer to experience the seascape from a threshold, in between as if it existed both in a single moment and also in a billion-year period. He opens a pathway for speculating on the forces that form the natural world and shifts the concept of sublime towards the realm of the speculative where water seems alien, ungraspable and a never-ending vast flow.

Sugimoto's *Seascapes* blur the boundaries between photography and painting. With their painterly quality, they position themselves in an ambiguous space where the line between the two media dissolves. The long-exposure technique allows the images to transcend the immediacy and accuracy of photographic realism, achieving a painterly stillness and ambiguousness while involving the materiality and precision of the photographic medium. This liminality between two media reflects a tension central to the sublime: co-existing of control and the uncontrollable. Unlike Romantic seascape depictions with dramatic catastrophic events, by portraying the infinite, vast and unfathomable vastness and distribution of water, Sugimoto's works reframe the sublime in a more contemporary conceptual and temporal dimension. *Seascapes* point out a shift from the dramatic, violent, and nature-centered encounters towards an unpresentable and speculative engagement with time, space and nature. "A sharp horizon line and a cloudless sky— here began my consciousness." writes Sugimoto, in this way he does not only contributes to the understanding of contemporary sublime but also elevates nature as an introspective and enduring encounter with consciousness (Sugimoto, n.d.).

4.3 Bill Viola *Ascension*



Figure 13. Still from Bill Viola's video installation *Ascension*, 2000.

Bill Viola (1951-2024) is an American contemporary video artist who created large-scale, multi-channel video installations that explore fundamental themes such as birth, death, spirituality, the relationship between the inner and outer world, the visible and the invisible, human consciousness via reimagining the confrontation moments of human beings with the natural, fundamental elements. He started experimenting with video when he was studying at Syracuse University in New York in between 1969-1973. In the early seventies, his position as video preparator at Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, gave him the chance to collaborate with influential video artists like Nam June Paik and Peter Campus (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). In his works we can see their influence as they created canonical examples for pushing the boundaries of video art and deconstructing the persistence of time, space and sound, and the perception of the viewers. Inspired by Paik's play with the temporal flow and Campus's experiments that disrupt the spatial consistency, he creates video works that convey a sense of dislocation and suspension. By blurring the boundaries between the spatio-temporal reality of the virtual and physical, he uses video as his main medium for creating deconstructed and inner-experience based realities.

During the two years that he worked in Florence, he encountered Renaissance culture and art, which later influenced his works. In many of his works like *The Greeting* (1995), *The Deluge* (2002) and the series *Martyrs* (2014) we can see traces of the iconography of Renaissance paintings and sculptures, as well as his mastery of the use of dramatic light and composition that convey profoundness that evokes the sense of a spiritual transcendence echoing the visual and technical qualities of Renaissance (Korey, 2017). As Renaissance art focused mainly on depicting the moments of profound introspection, emotional and spiritual expressions of humans, he also explores the universal human experiences such as birth, transformation and death. Therefore, he usually presents scenes that show human's vulnerability and transcendental states within the encounter with external forces like earth, fire, air and water. He uses these elements in almost all of his works in a way that mirrors the Renaissance's religious symbolism and allegories in which the visual elements and the use of light convey multiple layers of symbolic meaning that invite the viewer to contemplate. The motifs that reference the previous eras in Viola's works are not solely dependent on Western cultures. His travel to Japan also influenced his understanding and his artistic expression. His aesthetic approach contains the traces of Eastern philosophies and understanding as well as the Renaissance. In his contemplative, immersive and introspective video installations he creates a sense of transcendence and timelessness that mirrors the meditative and transformative practices of Eastern rituals. For Eastern philosophies, nature is central with its never-ending cycle and transformative power as an interconnectedness to understand life, transformation, and death. Influenced by these notions, the works of Viola present mostly the encountering moments of humans with life, death, and rebirth through the encounters with natural and elemental forces. In almost all of his body of work, he explores transcendence, liminality between life and death, the natural and the spiritual and the cyclical nature of existence in relation with the four natural elements. These works often involve slow-motion footages of figures in transformative passages between these dualities and evokes an elemental imagery that makes the viewer transcend the physicality and materiality of the video and imagine the universal and primordial concepts of existence. As one of the earlier examples in *The Crossing* (1996) he features a man encountering water and fire projected on a single plate back-to-back, symbolising the dualities of water and fire, destruction and renewal, generation and negation. In the

adaptation of Wagner's multimedia adaptation of *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859) in collaboration with Peter Sellars and conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen, *The Tristan Project* (2004) he explores the interplay between life and death, earthly desires and spiritual release, generative power of transcendence and destructive power of love through the relationship between Tristan and Isolde. Through transforming Wagner's themes in a visual, performative, and audial form, the work immerses the viewer in an existential tension that defines the sublime.

The series *Martys* (2014), consisting of four vertical screens, each showing a figure exposed to each element, symbolically presents the primordial human fears, pain and transformation and the power of nature's elements in a way that evokes a tension between resilience and transcendence, life, and death.



Figure 14. Still from *The Deluge* by Bill Viola, 2002, [Video art]. © Bill Viola Studio / Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

The Deluge (2002), a part of the video series *Going Forth By Day*, showing people swept away by a flood in slow-motion, portrays water as a powerful and

uncontrollable, destructive yet awe-inspiring force, symbolises water both as destruction and a transformative passage.

A near-death experience with water made it a central and recurring theme in Viola's works. At the age of 6, he sank in a lake in Upstate New York and nearly drowned while swimming. In interviews he recalls it as: "I actually had no fear..It was the most beautiful experience... I considered that a great gift." He claims that he intensely recognized water, fishes, the light that surrounds him, and experienced a profound transcendence (Kennicott, 2024). For Viola water functions as a visual and symbolic tool both as a content and material in a way that blurs the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual, a liminal space that invites contemplation on the cycle of both nature and existence.

4.3.1 Immersion to liminality: the wet nurse of becoming. The cyclical nature of life with the processes of birth, transformation, and death, is crucial for grasping the meaning of existence as a never-ending flow. Viola usually depicts these cyclical processes, such as submersion in or emergence from water resonating with the concepts of generation-negation, the purifying and the violent, darkness and light and fluidity in between these dualities. His approach offers viewers to see life as a fluid and never-ending process rather than a linear and earth-bounded rigid understanding. The video installation *Ascension* is exhibited in many galleries and museums and mostly projected on a large wall in a darkroom, in a way that allows the viewer to confront a figure descending in water in almost life-size or larger. It presents a male figure in slow motion within a dark blue waterscape, at first sight in an ambiguous way that the viewer cannot recognize whether he is submerging into or reemerging from the water. The ambiguity creates a contemplative temporal and spatial field where ascension and descension, immersion and emergence shift to each other. Through this ambiguity he questions the transcendence, dualities, life and death, and elemental forces in ways that evoke the sense of sublime.

As the figure submerges and reemerges from water and as the wavy underground sound is being heard in a continuous loop, the viewer slightly understands that the sequence of the events goes backwards as well as forwards. Similar to his video installation *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-79) in which he disintegrates the sequel of the events, in *Ascension*, he deconstructs the image-sound correlation in a way that

challenges our understanding of time and space. At first sight, the soundtrack of the underground water and crashing waves seems as if they correspond with the visual. As the slow-motion video continues and makes the viewer contemplate on the waterscape and the floating figure in between submerging and re-emerging, the lack of an actual correlation in between visual and audio becomes obvious in an unexpected way. Alongside the slow flow of the video, the quasi-invisible lack of the correspondence between time and space, the life-size scale of the installation evokes the sense of sublime. A figure submerging in or re-emerging from a dark waterscape on a life-size scale, slow-motion installation evokes a sense that the figure is in a liminal space and time, where both generation and negation might be happening. It evokes both the fear of drowning as one of the primal fears and also recalls the first months of a human life that began in the womb of mother or Plato's wet nurse of becoming *-khora-* (Plato, 360 B.C.E./2000).

With the waterscape in *Ascension*, he profoundly reminds this formless and liminal concept of Plato as an ontological and fluid space that both carries generation and negation which is both nurturing and violent in this sense. Although *khora* is a term originated by Plato as a receptacle, matrix or space for the becoming of elements and the physical world, Kristeva reframes it as pre-linguistic space of fluid becoming (Kristeva, 1974). Water, by being a matrix for the processes of becoming and a liminal and pre-linguistic space between generation and negation, life and death, darkness and light, carries the similar ontological qualities with *khora*. This liminality, inherent both in the concept of *khora* and water, embodies the essence of sublime by capturing the interplay between being something too familiar and unfamiliar. Viola's dark and fluid waterscape with the floating figure resonates with the term, through representing a womb-like space where the viewers see the primordial processes of birth and death beyond the boundaries of language and a structured form. He creates a primordial space where life and death, generation and negation and lightness and darkness coexist and transform each other in the fluidity of the waterscape. The use of darkness and light within the waterscape elevates the sense of sublime. While the darkness is open to be interpreted as the unknown, mysterious depthnesses of water, and as a metaphor of negation and the dissolution of identity, the ray of lights coming from above that we see after the submersion and emergence of the figure symbolizes the creative and generative forces. The figure's oscillation in between light and darkness creates a

liminal state in between being and nothing. The submersion of the figure recalls the return to the source and dissolution in the depths of water and embrace the negative forces, while the emergence of the figure suggests a birth/rebirth and the creative and generative forces of water and *khora*. The interplay between generation and negation, life, death, light, and darkness are depicted through the fluid and transformative power of water and reflects liminal states and cyclical processes inherent in our existence. Therefore, it invites the viewers to question the meaning of existence in this liminality. And the sublime occurs just at the moment we realize that we exist in the center of this liminality as oscillating beings.

4.3.2 The sublime and the fluid space of video. Viola, with *Ascension* brings together multiple understanding of the sublime. Since the figure is in a cyclical movement in between immersion and emergence in waterscape as a metaphor of generative and annihilating aspects of water, it evokes the Burkean sublime through its engagement with water as a vast, obscure, and awe-inspiring phenomena. Aligning with Burke's emphasis of the sublime as an experience that inherently carries a dual nature or a liminality, the ideas of pain, danger and terror on the one hand and the sense of astonishment and delightfulness on the other; the dark waterscape with a figure oscillating inside in between life and death carries this tension and liminality (Burke, 1757). The video's slow-motion pace increases the sense of the Burkean sublime since it is profoundly related to the intensity of emotional experience, especially fear and awe that is captured by its temporal dimension alongside the vastness of the dark water and the life-scale of the projection of the video. While Burke mainly focuses on the spatial vastness of natural phenomena, *Ascension* introduces the temporal dimension of the experience in a way that stretches and intensifies every single moment in the sequence. It creates a sense of monumentality and infinite liminality by destructing the mathematical, quantifiable time and extending the duration as a metaphor of an inner experience of temporality. Aligning with Bergson's *durée* that emphasized a time that is lived and felt, it allows the viewer to be immersed in the passage of time as a continuous and fluid experience rather than a measurable and divisible sequence (Bergson, 1896/ 1991). While Sugimoto's *Seascapes* resonated with Bergson's *durée* by stretching moments towards a single, infinite horizon, inviting the viewer into an

abstract and alien temporality, Viola's *Ascension* recalls *durée* through creating an immersed, embodied experience of temporality.

By the slow-motion screening of the video, it creates a hyper-awareness of the ephemerality and fluidity of life and the inevitability of mortality which are central to the sublime of Burke. Furthermore, it elevates the sublime not only through the spatial vastness and ungraspability of water but rather with the immensity and expansiveness of the experience of time in fluidity and ephemerality. While presentation of the encounter with water in art generally recalls the dynamic sublime of Kant, here with the slow-motion, extended time period in water it also recalls the mathematical sublime by challenging our ability to perceive it as a whole. From a Kantian perspective, here the sublime occurs not only in relation with water's immensity and power, but also by recalling our own strength and the power of reason with a different and supersensible standard of immensity and infinity. It elevates our imagination, allowing the mind to recognize its own sublimity, which transcends nature itself (Kant, 1987). Through the interplay between the visual, imagination and reason, *Ascension* aligns with the Kantian sublime. Viola combines the classical understandings of sublime in its content by focusing on the ungraspable and immense forces of water with the technological and contemporary sublime by using video as a technological medium that challenges our perception of time and space. Although he makes variations in terms of scale and format, almost every video piece that he makes conveys the sense of sublime at the core of a contemplative and immersive experience. Compared to the traditional media such as painting and sculpture, video has more ability to draw the attention of the viewer with its directness and immediacy. In the 1970s and 80s, the developing technologies in new media, especially in video, created a rupture in the understanding and experiencing of the sublime (Arya, 2013). It transformed the experience of the viewer by expanding the art object into immersive virtually constructed spaces and manipulated both time and space as well as the correlate and intricate relationship between them. As Viola uses video as an ephemeral and fluid, constantly in a state of flux media he creates possibilities for questioning the threshold in between the virtual reality and the unmediated awareness of life. Through its transient nature it reflects the impermanence and dynamism of the sublime. Furthermore, its lack of a fixed form, stable materiality and physicality, and its ephemeral existence dependent on an electrical flow, aligns with the ungraspable and

formless nature of water. Through these unique qualities as a medium, video immerses viewers into fluid, flowing realms and becomes a powerful medium for questioning the transformation of the sublime. Through challenging the boundaries of time and space by using video as his main medium, Viola challenges the boundaries between natural and technological, and physical and virtual. As a result, he transforms water, a primordial element into a scape that immerses the viewer into a liminality where boundaries between time and space dissolves and a fluid space of becoming that reflects the flow of life itself. It reminds us of our corporeal ties to primordial elements and the fluid and ever-transforming nature of our existence as beings fundamentally connected and shaped within water.



4.4 Anish Kapoor *Descension*



Figure 15. Photograph of Anish Kapoor's *Descension*, 2017, [Installation]. Photo courtesy of Public Art Fund, Brooklyn.

Anish Kapoor (1954) is an Indian British contemporary sculptor and installation artist who creates large-scale installations that focus on form, colour and space on the surface. His installations often carry profound philosophical concepts, exploring complementary and opposing ideas such as being and nothingness, presence and absence, light and darkness, solid and void. By exploring these dualities, his works evoke a sense of tension and sublimity between these concepts. After moving from Mumbai (Bombay) to London in the 1970s his sculptural innovations began. He infuses his cultural background rooted in spirituality and the rich traditional craftsmanship of India with the influences of the New British Sculpture Movement that broke from Minimalism and Post-Minimalism and uses new technologies in unconventional ways (The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, n.d.) Although he did not prefer to be recognized with his ethnicity, but with his creativity above all; “Indian concepts about colour, philosophy and mythology were nevertheless embedded in his sensibility” (Dalmia, 2016). In an interview after he went to India, he claims that:

“It was an astonishing kind of revitalisation and affirmation that all the things I thought might be true were true. All those themes that I had been working with about opposition, about fundamental polarities which seemed elemental, were equally true and elemental in Indian culture. It was a huge relief. So much being an artist is about understanding, and having a sense of belonging (MacDonald, 1998, 22).

His return to India allowed him to remember the cultural and philosophical roots that subtly formed his artistic vision and expression in a way that embodies a profound belonging to the elemental aspects of Indian culture as well as his personal themes.

Coming from a country that has rich craftsmanship qualities and merging them with new and unconventional technologies allows him to make unexpected sculptures and installations with the use of terrene elements such as marble, sandstone, granite, resin, colorful pigments (including the Vantablack, a super black made of carbon nanotubes) and water. He pushes the boundaries of traditional sculpture-making by combining a high level of craftsmanship, a delicate and unexpected usage of materials and immersive scales in a way that evokes the sense of awe, transcendence, and sublimity.

Anish Kapoor's works with their large-scale, meticulous use of material and most importantly with the engagement with space and perception, often result in evoke the sense of sublime. One of his canonical works, *Sky Mirror* (2001) with polished, reflective surfaces transforms and distorts the viewer's perception of space, blurring boundaries between the finite and the infinite.



Figure 16. Anish Kapoor, *Leviathan*, 2011. View from inside the artwork (2). Photo by Plowy Didier. © Monumenta 2011, Ministry of Culture and Communication.

Leviathan (2011) exemplifies the sublime through its interplay of immense scale, organic design, and the 19th-century architecture of the Grand Palais. It immerses viewers in a vast, otherworldly interior, membrane-like structure, invoking awe, insignificance, and fragility within a liminal space, both futuristic and industrial, and organic (Menezes, 2011). From one of his earlier works, *Descent into Limbo* (1992), challenging the perception of the viewers with an abyss-like, dark circular void painted in Vantablack, lays the foundational themes that connect to later works like *Descension* (2014). As a simple and minimalist installation, it transcends the boundaries of perception, sense of space and reality, evoking both awe and unease. The work embodies Kapoor's ambition for creating an interplay between presence and absence, inviting contemplation of the void.

4.4.1 The void as a liminal space of becoming. One of his canonical installations *Descension* (2014) is a 16-foot diameter whirlpool filled with a constantly moving black water that creates an immersive vortex towards a dark void. The work was installed in various locations with little changes due to its environment. It has been featured in various art institutions, galleries and public spaces worldwide. It was

featured as part of the 2016 Nuit Blanche in Paris, an event showcasing over 40 artistic projects along the Seine, with 150 works spread across the city.



Figure 17. Anish Kapoor, *Descension*, 2016. Installation view at Nuit Blanche, Seine River, Paris, France. © Anish Kapoor.

It was one of the most impressive installations of *Descension* since the juxtaposition of the natural and the engineered made the piece both rooted in nature and also transcending it. The immersion of the work within the waters of river Seine elevates the work in a way that challenges the boundaries between human, nature and technology. Unlike previous installations of *Descension*, which were located into the ground at locations such as India's Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Italy's Galleria Continua, and the Versailles, this installation transforms the Seine itself into an unfathomable vortex (Kordic, 2016).

Although it is made of a steel tank and equipped with a motor that works to spin water, it evokes the sense of the infinite depthness of a void and the possibility of descending towards an unknown and fatal abyss. However, because of the expanded field of the installation that is beyond the traditional forms and materials of critical distance of the viewer to the whirlpool, it becomes like an inner edge, a liminal space as the threshold in between life and death, being and nothingness. The large-scale and

immersive qualities of the work align with Rosalind Krauss's concept of the sculpture in the expanded field, combining natural forces with architectural and elemental power (Krauss, 1979). Reminding Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty which is an example of site construction in terms of Krauss concept, -especially when embedded to river Seine-, merges human-made structure within a natural site and blurs the boundaries of the limits of perception and transcend the conventional boundaries of both the medium and form. It makes the viewer reimagine the potential of sculpture in between landscape and architecture and evokes the sense of the sublime through its seamless integration into the environment, transforming water into an ever-transforming, formless abyss. Kapoor merges this duality subtly, embodying both the transformative potential of human creativity and the infinite, formless qualities of the natural world. Fluidity of water in opposition to stability and rigidity, he favours in betweenness as a state of becoming and a potential for transformation. By the unending immense and dynamic loop of the swirling water in the abyss, it overwhelms the viewer's comprehension and evokes awe and terror, resonating with the Burkean sublime that is rooted in awe and terror in the face of nature. Standing on the edge of Kapoor's vortex, from a close distance from above, embodies the sense of awe, unease, and astonishment. As the immensity, formlessness, and darkness that it conveys, it makes the viewer's imagination strive to progress towards the possibility of encountering a threatening natural force. Just like Bill Viola's *Ascension*, it makes the viewers encounter the very primordial fears that occur when we are in the liminal state between generation and negation, darkness and light, life, and death, the known and the unknown.

The whirlpool that continuously spirals seems as if the dark water is going to disappear towards an abyss, a void, however it never stops. While the movement of water towards an abyss represents the transience and the ephemerality of time, the infinite process of whirling and the restless and never-ending cyclical flux of water reminds the never-ending cyclical time flow and the state of becoming in between these dualities.

“There is something else that I am very interested in pursuing a little further. Something that does make me a little uncomfortable. While I affirm in-betweenness I also wish to say that there is nothing in-between about this at

all. The void works are for me a poetic and spiritual concept. In-betweenness is a statement of cultural certainty and not one of cultural ambiguity. If we are to speak of void as in-between then it is not in-between two predefined cultural realities, but, in-between in the sense that it is potential, that it is becoming, that it is emerging, that it is probable, possible” (Kapoor, 1993).

Kapoor’s thoughts on the void are not simply related to in-betweenness, but more to its potentiality of transformation and becoming. It reflects how the vortex of the swirling water in *Descension* suggests a liminal space of becoming. It is a dynamic abyss that invites viewers to a never-ending descent but also to its unfathomable and ungraspable vastness and dynamism. It can be read as a metaphor of a continuous flow in between generation and negation, creation and dissolution. The water’s unending movement in the abyss, its formlessness, fluidity, and dynamism reflect the way he sees void. The void here is not a negative absence but a generative one that embodies and presents a space for the imagination and the spirit to embrace unending possibilities that lie beneath the rigid, earth-bounded cultural certainties.

Kapoor’s use of water aligns with Bachelard’s juxtaposition of the material and imaginative as an interrelated and interdependent relation between nature and culture. Through the very materiality of water both Bachelard and Kapoor invite us to see by means of water’s fluidity, immensity, and dynamism. Bachelard claims that science and poetry originated from the same source but go through different pathways as science tries to neglect the power of metaphors unlike poetry. Philosophy, nevertheless, tends to bring science and poetry together even as two complementary contraries (Bachelard, 1942/2006). Similarly, Kapoor blends poetic approach with scientific precision, in a way that he combines spiritual depthness with engineering skills where metaphysics and technology clash and evoke the sublime. In *Descension* water is not merely a material or a physical substance but a medium of transcendence. In the engagement with water beyond its materiality and physicality, through imagination and reverie as Bachelard suggests, it reveals its multi-layered depthnesses, allowing us to experience its sublimity in both classical and contemporary conceptions.

4.4.2 The Sublime interplay of nature and technology. In *Descension* he combines the former experience of sublime related to nature's power with a meticulous use of technology, as a result he elevates the imagination of the viewer and evokes different layers of the sublime. Since Kapoor's work with the swirling abyss, he makes the viewer confront profound existential themes, it aligns with the sublime of Longinus that is related to emotional and intellectual elevation (Longinus & Roberts, 2019). The never-ending cyclical movement of water draws the viewer into a contemplative state and an elevated imagination, leading them to imaginarily descend into the unfathomable and ungraspable void of water. However, since it is an engineered and human-made vortex, the experience of sublime here is not related only to the confrontation with the physical vastness and dynamism of water but more related to its ability to transform the perception and elevate the imagination. He brings the Longinian sublime into the contemporary field of art that transcends the ordinary through the combination of natural and technological material with artistic expression. Therefore, we can trace the evolution of the classical sublime understanding through the combination of natural and human-made forces in an immersive installation that both embodies and questions the technology's ability to recreate natural scenes. Here, technology serves as a medium that regenerates and evokes the sublimity of water through its endless cycle and immensity. The environment that is created with the ability of technology and human ratio, but also with natural material, draws viewers into an experience where technology regenerates nature's dynamism and immensity and challenges the boundaries between human, nature, and technology. It conveys water's natural qualities such as fluidity, depthness and volatile power while reforming it in a technologically controlled and ever-transforming, continuous descent. This interplay evokes a sublime that is both classical and contemporary, inviting viewers to encounter an engineered, but also profoundly elemental and natural experience. This approach recalls an interpretation of the Kantian sublime regarding that the *Descension's* sublimity is both rooted in the overwhelming qualities of water but also in the human capacity for imagination and reason (Kant, 1987). The encounter with the swirling motion and the continuous flow of water represents the dynamic and overpowering force of nature, and it resonates with Kant's dynamic sublime as it reminds the possibility of a natural threat to our existence. However, the sublimity that an artwork evokes is different from the sublimity that occurs in the mere encounter

with a natural force. By stimulating the viewer's imagination and creating a transcendental experience, *Descension* does not only remind the possible empowerment of nature but also the mind's own sublimity. The fact that the vortex is a consequence of the human-made engineering technologies it becomes a metaphor of the power of mind and its ability to conceptualize and reconstruct natural phenomena that evoke sublime. It creates a complementary and dual experience of the sublime; one is rooted in the watery phenomena with its overwhelming and ungraspable qualities and the other that elevates the human capacity for imagination and reason, highlighting the transcendence of reason over the natural world.

In this liminality, Kapoor's work also aligns with the contemporary sublime defined by Simon Morley, where transcendence occurs not in a distant, absolute realm but in the immediate and immanent here and now. As Morley claims the contemporary sublime often occurs within the "immanent transcendence", the swirling vortex that presents a descension towards the abyss, the absence, it evokes a spatial ambiguity and uneasiness that makes viewers feel both grounded, but also disoriented (Morley, 2010).



Figure 18. Anish Kapoor, *Descension*, 2014. Installation view at the 2015 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India. © Anish Kapoor.

Observing descension draws the eye to perceive the physicality and materiality of the watery abyss but simultaneously transforms the fixed spatial understanding through the infinite and unknown. While transforming the perception of space by immersing viewers in a continuous movement, it also transcends the boundaries of mathematical, linear time by presenting a cyclical, never-ending flow without beginning or end. This cyclical flow embodies the concepts of in-betweenness and therefore becoming as Kapoor claims previously (Kapoor, 1993). It creates a liminal field that is always in flux in between the complementary dualities such as darkness and light, life and death, being and nothingness, generation and negation. The movement towards the abyss suggests a descent into darkness as a metaphor for the unknown, mysterious depthness, absence and even death, while its surface is enlightened and symbolizes generation and potential for emergence and birth. However, by the oscillation between lightness and darkness it emerges an existential tension and liminality between presence and absence. The liminal space that the work embodies offers neither a beginning nor an end, it symbolizes our experience of the existence as a flow. In this dynamic flow, we encounter being as becoming, a never-ending flux that defines life.

As a result, the sublimity in this work comes both in several ways. Using innovative engineering and the ability to form water as if it is descending into an abyss, it creates an immersive experience that elicits a sense of awe and astonishment. By creating an encounter with such a technological use of materials and engineering, it also evokes the sense of the technological sublime as well as the natural sublime. By the ability to control and give form to a natural formless element, it also presents the superiority and capacity of the human mind through the use of technology. With this work, the sublime related to the vastness or the dynamic, mighty power of nature, is expanded with the technologically created waterscape. Therefore, it creates a new threshold in between the natural technological sublime.

In these three canonical waterscapes, *Seascapes* by Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Ascension* by Bill Viola and *Descension* by Anish Kapoor, water materializes fluidity as a primordial condition that dissolves and transforms dualities into a liminal state of being as becoming. The fluidity and liminality that the works carry, embody the essence of transformation and becoming, blurring the boundaries between dualities such as

presence and absence, light and darkness, generation and negation, the visible and invisible.

Each work presents the relationship between the sublime and water through different media, perspectives, and conceptual frameworks, signalling multiplicities in which contemporary art engages with the infinite, transformative and ungraspable and elusive qualities of both water and the sublime.

Sugimoto's *Seascapes* invite viewers to the waterscapes from around the world as a liminal space where water is an eternal, timeless and imperceptible element. By abstracting the indexical and representative visuality of photography through reducing the image into two contrasting bands, and using long exposure time, the series evoke a sense of sublime that explores the limits of representation and the unrepresentable. The viewer confronts a horizon - which is also a liminality by its very nature- at the sea, in between the volatile air and solid earth-, as a space of dissolution of the celestial and terrestrial, the presentable and the unrepresentable. This approach aligns with Lyotard's concept of sublime, where the experience of sublime is no longer dependent on a direct confrontation with the ungraspable natural forces, but instead about a confrontation with the unrepresentable (Lyotard, 1982). By engaging with formlessness and absence it explores the boundaries between representation and abstraction. By depicting the elusive movements of water from all around the world which are beyond our immediate perception, water here aligns with Morton's concept of hyperobjects, reminding viewers of temporal and spatial vastness of water that eludes direct, immediate human experience.

In contrast, in Viola's *Ascension*, the slow-motion movement inviting the viewers inside the depthnesses of water with a figure oscillating in a womb-like space, shifts the perspective inward. Through distorting time and elongating the actual time of the performance with slow-motion, it immerses viewers into an immersive and inner flow of time, resonating with Bergson's *durée*. The slow-motion flow of the video intensifies the sense of liminality as the figure oscillates between drowning and resurfacing. Therefore, it increases the intensity of emotional experience and evokes the sense of Burkean sublime, especially fear and awe that is captured by its temporal dimension alongside the spatial vastness of water and life-scale projection. It transcends the actual time flow and positions the viewers inside and below water, and blurs the distinctions between the actual, metaphysical, and the virtual. Thus, Viola's

exploration of water involves elements of the contemporary sublime, making the viewers active participants and using video technology to create both an immediate and transcendent experience of the liminal space of water, inhabiting the threshold between life and death, and submergence and emergence.

While Sugimoto's *Seascapes* involves a minimalist yet profound contemplation on the infinite and speculative nature of water, and Viola's *Ascension* manipulates temporality to create an unsettling experience of sublime; Kapoor distinguishes itself with its immense and dynamic physicality and direct interaction with viewer. By positioning the viewers above the whirling abyss of water, the immediate and direct experience of observing the descension makes the viewer perceive its physicality and materiality of the work, but simultaneously evokes a spatial ambiguity, uneasiness and a sense of annihilation. It creates a double-headed experience of the sublime; one is rooted in the watery phenomena with its overwhelming and ungraspable dynamism and the other that elevates the human capacity for imagination and reason, highlighting the transcendence of reason and technology over the natural world. The combination of the classical conception of sublime related to nature's power and the potency of technological mediation expands and redefines our encounters with the vast and the unknown.

As threshold between the elemental and human-made, physical and metaphysical the void of Kapoor positions itself as a liminal space of becoming, aligning with Simon Morley's concept of the contemporary sublime, where transcendence is experienced in between a constructed and alienating reality, and the unmediated awareness of life (Morley, 2010).

Together, these works with their unique approaches and conceptualisations on water, reinterpret and challenge the traditional notions of the sublime, inhabiting both classical and contemporary understandings. They present water both as a natural element with its ungraspable qualities and as a space for exploring human fragility, ecological transformation, and the thresholds of perception. Through their different perspectives both visually and philosophically they collectively unveil the primordial qualities of water that continue to inspire awe and transcendence in contemporary art, presenting it as a liminality between the actual and speculative, the natural and technological, and the immanent and transcendent. By presenting its ever-changing

and fluid nature, they invite us to consider water as a metaphor of being in flux and a medium for experiencing and understanding the sublime.



Chapter 5

Conclusion

The primary focus of the thesis is the exploration of the water's sublimity in contemporary art, questioning their bond as both an existential and ecological force that challenges traditional boundaries of perception and representation. Central to this inquiry it examines how water's inherent qualities –its fluidity, immenseness, and transformative nature– evoke the sense of sublime by embodying dynamic interplays between generation and negation, the purifying and the violent, darkness and light, visible and invisible, volatile air and solid earth. These interplays reflect the broader argument of the thesis; that both water and the sublime are dynamic and fluid phenomena, inherently related to liminality where boundaries of life and death, nature and technology, immanence and transcendence, and reality and speculation dissolve. By investigating water through the concept of sublime, the thesis aimed to evoke an awareness of our bond with this primordial element, not merely as a physical substance but also as a metaphor for existence as being in flux, in the never-ending process of becoming.

Water, as both a physical element and a conceptual metaphor, holds the capacity to evoke the sublime, while reflecting the fluid and ever-changing cycles of our existence. Therefore, the study of the relationship between water and the sublime in contemporary art is crucial as it opens an area to reconsider the relationship between humanity, nature and technology profoundly.

In contemporary art, water serves as a pathway to reinterpret and reimagine traditional understandings of the sublime, expanding the focus from its classical associations with the grandiosity of nature towards the technological and speculative dimensions of the current era. Whether as a content, medium, material or metaphor, it provides artists a primordial base for exploring the transitions between life and death, nature and technology, immanence and transcendence, and reality and imagination. The research positions water not only as a subject of aesthetic experience of the sublime, but also as a hyperobject that is beyond the immediate, inviting viewers to confront the limits of perception and the interconnectedness of life. Through this perspective, the thesis reconsidered how contemporary art challenges traditional boundaries and inspires new imaginative engagements with the sublime and nature.

Hiroshi Sugimoto, Anish Kapoor, and Bill Viola each redefine the contemporary sublime through their unique approaches to water as a subject, material, and metaphor. Together with their diverse media and conceptual frameworks, these works present water both as a natural phenomenon and a vast, dynamic background for complex existential, philosophical, and ecological inquiries. By expanding their own respective media, they meticulously highlight the evolving relationship between water and the sublime, showing how contemporary artworks transform classical understandings, incorporating technological advancements and speculative perspectives. By doing so, they challenge the boundaries of the perception of time and space through reimagining the sublime in contemporary terms, as a fluid concept related both to the natural and technological, the immanent and transcendent. In these canonical waterscapes, water materialises fluidity as a condition that transforms dualities into a liminal state of being as an ever-transforming process of becoming. The intersection of the natural and the technological, and the immanent and transcendent, in the works of Hiroshi Sugimoto, Anish Kapoor, and Bill Viola plays a crucial role in defining the contemporary sublime. Together these artworks with their distinct approaches and the use of media, uniquely highlight and create a multi-dimensional perspective on the evolving relationship between water and the sublime in artistic exploration.

Sugimoto's *Seascapes* series depicts water's timelessness and vastness, resonating with its hyperobject-like qualities as a vast entity that is massively distributed in time and space.

Viola's video art piece *Ascension*, immerses viewers in the transformative, liminal space of water, evoking the sublime through the interplay and oscillation between life, death, and transcendence. And finally, Kapoor's large-scale installation *Descension*, that transforms water into an engineered vortex, challenges the boundaries between the natural and the technological more obviously, embodying the capacity of the contemporary sublime to evoke awe and contemplation. These three works were chosen as they each challenge the boundaries of their own respective media, reimagine water's sublimity through distinct artistic approaches. And together they evoke a reconsideration of our existence as a state of becoming in flux and our bond with the natural elements from different perspectives both visually and philosophically. Their waterscapes exemplify how the sublime has evolved in the expanded field of reimagination and artistic exploration of the natural world through

technological means. These works bring together the immanent and transcendent, transforming the sublime from a purely nature-bound concept into a multidimensional experience that includes human innovation and artistic exploration; “arising in a gap that exists between, on the one hand, a socially constructed and alienating reality, and on the other, unmediated awareness of life” (Morley, 2010, p.4). The contemporary sublime emerges as a hybrid phenomenon, as it is rooted in the awe and terror evoked by nature’s transcendence, ungraspability and elusiveness yet reframed by the artistic exploration and technological interventions that reimagine and intensify this as an immanent and transformative experience occurring in the here and now. Each work carries the tension between the immanent—actual and immediate presence of water—and the transcendent, where human imagination and reason elevated towards a conceptual and existential realm of being in flux.

The thesis contributes to the evolving discourses on the sublime, by examining the role of water as a central subject in contemporary art with a philosophical and ecological inquiry. Here, water is presented not only as a primordial element, but also as a profound metaphor for fluidity, vastness and transformation, and a liminal space where the boundaries dissolve.

From a historical perspective, the research traced the evolution of water’s significance, from its religious, mythological and philosophical roots to its reconsideration as a resource domesticated by human intervention. Focusing on these shifts, it created a contextual background for rethinking the cultural, ecological, and technological transformations that shape our perception of water as both a natural and cultural phenomenon.

Philosophically, the thesis reinterpreted classical theories of the sublime and by building on their foundational understandings it explored the evolving approaches of the sublime. Classical conceptions, such as Burke’s focus on awe and terror inspired by nature’s immensity, and Kant’s focus on the transcendence of the mind over the overwhelming forces of the natural world, incorporated with contemporary, technological, and ecological paradigms. This approach is further developed by modern and contemporary theories of the sublime which do not rely solely on nature to evoke awe but instead on a dynamic interplay between presence and absence, nature and technology, immanence and transcendence, and reality and speculation. The relationship between water and the sublime was approached both as a phenomenon to

be experienced through sensory and emotional engagement in the field of philosophy and aesthetics, and as a hyperobject—vast and elusive phenomena—beyond the immediate human experience. This approach expanded the sublimity of water beyond human-centered experiences, forcing us a recognition of the interconnectedness of all things from an ecological perspective.

By exploring water's sublimity through interdisciplinary perspectives such as historical, philosophical, aesthetic, and ecological, this research involved a fluid approach to disciplinary boundaries, reflecting the elusive, unfathomable, and fluid characteristics of water which requires insights from multiple periods and fields. It contributed to the field by positioning the sublime, with its capacity to evoke awe and terror, as a concept for reconsidering the transformative power of water as they both navigate the thresholds between life and death, nature and technology, immanence, and transcendence. As water transforms into the material and medium of the sublime, the sublime, in turn, becomes a metaphor for water.

Through exploring the historical and philosophical inquiries and artistic approaches, this research explored how the sublime has evolved not solely dependent on the vastness and immensity of nature, but also on the complexities of human intervention and technological mediation. By focusing on the intersections of different forms of sublimity through contemporary artworks, it highlights the dual role of art in our current era: as a site for reconsidering the critical reflections of the Anthropocene and as a space for reimagining alternative relationships with nature, with water serving both as an integral part of nature and as its metaphor.

Despite the extensive focus of water's sublimity in this thesis, gaps remain in the intersection of ecology, art and speculative realism, particularly in how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality could further reshape the sublime. In the broader field of the study, there is a limited attention that has been paid to how temporal phenomena and hyperobjects such as climate change or geological time, shape our perception of elements and nature. Much of the scholarship on the elements and the sublime remains rooted in Western-centered philosophies. Exploring non-Western approaches to water, the sublime, and ecology could offer new insights and diversify the field. Alongside these, future studies with a deeper focus on how emerging technologies and approaches such as AI, VR or Bio Art redefine our perception of elements and the environment could be contributed to the field.

Inspired by exploring the intersection of nature, human and technology through artistic and philosophical inquiries, I aim to expand this inquiry in two directions. The first focuses on liminality, exploring threshold areas and spaces of transition as critical zones where boundaries dissolve and transformation occurs. It would provide a basis for rethinking the interplay between natural and constructed environments, as well as human and non-human elements. Following this, the second direction delves into hyperobjects, examining how their elusive, expansive, and interconnected and incomprehensible qualities can be presented visually and conceptually in art, offering new perspectives on ecological, philosophical, and existential inquiries. This aligns closely with my artistic practice, which already engages with visual and conceptual interpretations of the sublime and liminality and hyperobjects.

From a personal point of view, as we navigate an era of ecological fragility, by addressing the relationship between these two evolving and fluid concepts, water and the sublime, I hope to contribute to a reimagined relationship with the elements and the natural world, where art becomes a field for evoking ecological awareness and a deeper understanding of cohabitation with the elements. This approach also aligned with my consideration of elements as more than mere resources, but as ever-evolving, interconnected agents in shaping existential, cultural, and philosophical thoughts.

This inquiry has deepened my understanding of water and the sublime as an artist, reflecting my belief in the transformative power of art as an inclusive field that reflects the complexities of the contemporary era, where the boundaries between nature and technology, immanence, and transcendence, are increasingly fluid.

Water and the sublime, with their mutual capacity to evoke awe, astonishment, and transformation, remain continuing and evolving forces in shaping human thought, artistic expression, and ecological consciousness, especially shifting our perspective from considering ourselves as 'being in the world' to 'being in flux'. Reconsidering their dynamic interplay allows us to confront the vastness of existence and our fragile place within it, inspiring a deeper reimagination and awareness of our interconnectedness with the natural world and urging us to reimagine our relationship with the elements and the cosmos.

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