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RICE UNIVERSITY

RE-INScribing THE FIGURE
WITHIN THE MACHinIC SUBLIMe

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULfillMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

Re-inscribing the Figure Within the Machinic Sublime

by

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Emerging morphology of American megalopolis includes a parallel arrival of mega-
structures and correlative empty spaces. Anthropomorphic relations to these
phenomenon have been ignored in favor of economic efficacy and mass production.
Although the scalar disjunction between space, form and figure is inherently a
physically determinate one, it represents an existential conundrum concerning
subjectivity as well; attempting to locate one’s self among or between these mega-
objects, one may also try to reconcile the externalized circumstances that created, and
are right now becoming, these episodes of hyper-juxtaposition, i.e. late-capitalism.
The philosophical armature of the sublime is equipped to contextualize this post-
anthropomorphic architectural condition in terms of contemporary subjectivity and
figural inscription. Conversely, the investigation reveals an effort to conjecture on an
altered subject, in terms of what Jameson calls ‘Hyperspace’, the most recent
mutation of space, having “succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual
human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually...” ¹

¹ Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pg. 44.
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Introduction

The investigation cartwheeled into a resurrection of the sublime in mid-stride; not as a desire for any sort of nostalgic romanticism, but rather as a possible strategy of ‘naming’ a contemporary spatial condition. Without completely dismissing the rigorous structure imbedded in the history of the sublime, it seems possible to extract and inflect what has been heralded the ‘philosophical underpinning of modernism’, according to Lyotard, into a (somewhat bemused) speculation on subjectivity in this era of post- techno/industrialism.
The methodology in appropriating this stance concerning the sublime is somewhat retrospective. The initial interest began with my appeal for some sort of commiseration with a simple frustration: the inability to present the non-demonstrable-an empty airport tarmac. Although its being visually difficult to communicate was the first and most general issue I dealt with, it became apparent that as an abstract, machinic entity it could be grouped with a much larger, ambitious field of inquiry; that of the totalizing ‘network of global post-industrialism’. This latter term is used with suspicion on my part; almost a cliche by now, it seems to connote a zeitgeistian everything. Frederic Jameson, in attempting to find some logic to contemporary culture, has assumed that there exists a spatiality inherent in this network, perhaps in sympathy to our not being able to imagine, or cognitively map it. “The problem is one of representation, and also representability: we know that we are caught within these more complex global networks, because we palpably suffer the prolongations of corporate space everywhere in our daily lives. Yet we have no way of thinking about them, of modeling them, however abstractly, in our mind’s eye. this inconceivable financial system and a combination of abstract wealth and real power in which all of us also believe, without many of us ever really knowing what that might be or look like.”¹ The problem of trying to ‘know where you are’, and even describe ‘where you are’, in the midst of a hugely complex abstract and physical space, seemed to be already queried in the writings of Edmund Burke, albeit in a different context.

Although Jameson only briefly mentions, much less credits, the sublime, the questions being posed are not dissimilar.

Doctored Sublimity

The sublime, as it came to fruition in the 18th century as a critical term, could be considered the empiricism of all that had been deemed best explained under the

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2 The sublime was first introduced within the rubric of rhetoric, by Longinus, in the Classic Greece.
auspice of religion; an attempt to acknowledge things that have emotive effect with objective, positivist description. Important to the investigation of the sublime, and to the problem I have set forth concerning my specific ‘spatial’ project, are the problems concerning the dilution of the corporal inscription in space, and the correlative anthropocentric issue of being able to communicate infinity or indeterminateness in relation to this figure.

Edmund Burke’s “A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful” of 1757 puts forth a veritable recipe of happenings, conditions and objects that incur the ‘sublimino-sensate’, from difficulty to smallness, obscurity to ugliness. Emblematic of the enlightenment, his treatise was a veritable system, or logic, of transcendence. Early on he posits that most of the ideas which are capable of making a powerful impression on the mind are for the sake of self-preservation. ³ The importance of the body as a transmitting device to induce an effect of the sublime is paramount. “The passions which concern self-preservation turn mostly on pain or danger... Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite these ideas, whatever is in any sort terrible, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.”⁴

⁴ Burke, pg. 39.
There exists a threshold of tolerance to this pain, from which the terror can be reflected upon, and even relished. The ‘terrors’ that Burke refers to are contingent upon a list of deprivations of positives: “a privation of light- a terror of darkness- a privation of objects-a terror of emptiness, a privation of society-a terror of solitude.”\(^5\) The ultimate privation is, of course, life: the accompanying terror is that it will cease to exist, leaving only the infinity of death. **Hence the corporeal and the infinite become accomplices:** “for this terror to mingle with pleasure and with it produce a sublime sensation, it is also necessary that the terror-causing threat be suspended, kept at bay, held back. This suspense, this lessening of threat of danger, provokes a kind of pleasure which is hardly positive satisfaction, but is rather more like relief.”\(^6\) It is the privation of being deprived of these terrors that Burke called, suspiciously, ‘delight’. The latter is the precedent for the quip, “no pain, no gain”; his sublime was not a matter of transcendence through elevation, but rather an earthly, secular experience grounded in sensory ‘intensification.’

In his philosophical investigations on knowledge, Immanuel Kant portrays a void left over from the mind’s inability to re-present the surmounting intricacy of an ‘enlightened’ era. “At the same time that intellect needs to rise above the ‘mire and complexity’ of an empirical, experiential world, excessive intellectual detachment or purity presents us with a complementary threat: of concepts finding no


\(^6\) Lyotard, pg.40.
representation." In his Critique of Judgment, proceeding Burke’s Enquiry in 1790, a similar ‘transcendent empiricism’ is taking place: “the overall telos of the Kantian philosophy is to serve as the conceptual instrument by means of which Judeo-Christian ontotheology is supplanted with a secular religion; implemented by purely intellectual (i.e. logical) processes. In keeping with an anthropocentric ideology that all transcendental or supersensible entities and processes for which the Kantian speculations make provisions must be deducible, on the basis of human brain power.”

Hence Kant also includes the apprehension of the body in space, and the contemplation of indeterminateness in his treatise. However, his body is to become the ‘body without organs,’ one dissolved of weight and pro-active.

Kant divided the sublime into two systems which serve as avenues into the issues of infinity and (anti)anthropocentricism respectively: the mathematical and the dynamic. The latter deals with that which is quantitatively absurd- absolutely large.

Since phenomena and objects in nature are measurable, and therefore ‘great’ or absurd in relation to other things, infinity can ultimately be only an idea, not a quality of that object itself. Hence indeterminateness is struck from an association with the body. "nothing that can be an object of the senses can be called sublime. Our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real

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3 Kant, pg. 250.
idea, and so the imagination, our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. What is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect gets through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment.” Kant was hence conceptualizing the visceralness of a supposed sublime object, transferring what could be a viable bodily reaction, pain for instance, to a sort of reverse psycho-semanticism.

As Kant professed that ‘relativity’ negates sublimity, and to represent is to make a relation to ‘something’, it is impossible to do such with any ‘absolute’- the universe, humanity, the moment, the species, the end of history, etc... One cannot represent these phenomenon, only that they exist through what Kant calls ‘negative representation’, and ‘abstraction’; revealing their power through their absence. Attempting to follow the transition from sense-experience to that of pure intellection is indicative of what Burke also troubled with: ‘the manner in which thought represents its own data or findings to itself.’ Burke, however, did not go so far as to leave the body behind.

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10 Kant, pg. 263.
Re-representation

The prevailing shift toward a conceptual rigor is clearly articulated within the realm of the visual arts, explaining much of the turn from Romanticism to modernism, (a sort of pseudo-romanticism). Although the progenitors Burke, Kant and even Longinus both embraced the word, rather than the image, for extolling its sensations, visual art (inevitably) became co-opted within the dialogue of the sublime. In attempting to evoke what is unrepresentable, the word was deemed more capable of offering conceptual possibilities; Burke remarked that they can evoke matters of the soul without having to consider visibly, and that "by words we have it in our power to
make such combinations as we cannot possibly do otherwise.”\textsuperscript{11} However, visual art also became an agent of the sublime, able to proliferate ideas unaccommodated for by language; “it would henceforth become necessary to analyze the ways in which audiences could be affected, how the recipient receives and experiences the world of art, and how they are judged. This is how esthetics, the analysis of the amateur’s feelings, came to replace poetics and rhetoric, which were intended specifically for the artist.”\textsuperscript{12} The esthetics of the sublime, moreover, are not predisposed to any consensus of taste. No longer would there be a vocabulary of symbols from which to judge and, or, understand, leaving them effectually indeterminate in terms of possible interpretation. In addition, the transaction between viewer and art acknowledged a bodily condition to be dealt with; standing close or far; looking up or down; touching or not touching it.

In his article “The Sublime and the Avant Garde”, Francois Lyotard remarks that “Burke’s observations heralded the possibility of emancipating works of art from classical mimetic laws.” Beginning with the empty landscapes of Church and Turner, for instance, and continuing through the entropic earth work of Robert Smithson, to the present with the light and space installations of Turrell and Irwin, one can trace this emancipation clearly.

\textsuperscript{11} Burke, pg. 77.
\textsuperscript{12} Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Representing the Unrepresentable”, Artforum, (Summer, 1989) pg. 39.
The progressive dissolution of form and figure obvious in any analysis of Modern art, speaks initially of the introduction of technology as a challenge to painting. On one hand, in it’s pre-mature state, the ‘aura-sucking medium of photography’ was obviously the more efficient tool for ‘recording’ life’s events. However, as Lyotard explains, “Science, technology and capital, in spite of their matter-of-fact approach, are also modes of making concrete the infinity of ideas. Knowing all, being capable of all, having all their horizons- and horizons extend to infinity. The ready-made in the techno-sciences presents itself as a potential for infinite production, and so does the photograph.” ¹³ Hence is the claim that Modernity, rather than anything materially specific, scenic or even spatial, that becomes the oculus into the sublime.

Paintings submission to photography the task of identification meant a transformation within the medium. Rather than asking themselves, ‘what do I paint?,’ the question became, ‘what is painting?’ “Modern painters discovered that they had to represent the existence of that which was not demonstrable if the perspectival laws of costruzione legittima were followed. They set about to revolutionize the supposed visual givens in order to reveal that the field of vision simultaneously conceals and needs the invisible, that it relates therefore not only to the eye, but to the spirit as well.”¹⁴ Hence painting became the query of an indeterminate force incarnated such that it would eventually question it’s own validity, at the same time becoming an apparatus for portraying that same

¹³ Lyotard, pg. 50.
¹⁴ Lyotard, pg. 51.
indeterminateness. In attempting to present the non-demonstrable, Lyotard suggests that now there are no established pedestrianized symbols, figures or forms to rely on; good, just, true, infinite etc... For the likes of the Romantic painters, such as Church or Turner, these absolutes did have their analogs, usually in nature. Grand mountainscapes, abysmal gorges, ominous skies and seas, architectural ruins and lonely figures; all were standard content for attempting to represent a secular, all-powerful ‘Other’.

The paintings, however, are basically depicting sublime subjects, usually explicitly and with traditional means. Within the theoretical framework of the sublime, the frustration at not being able to appropriately give these issues visual justice produces a gap for the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined. The tension between these two is what Kant calls an ‘agitation’; an irritation from one trying to imagine that which you can’t see and at the same time knowing of your own inability, or humbleness, in doing so. However, in many of the Romantic paintings, it was common to have a refuge of sunlit pasture, or some other respite from the foreboding abyss beyond; these means of narrative escape seem to somehow soothe that agitation. With continued exploration, expanding into what could be called the Abstract Sublime, this agitation became more pronounced and demanding of one’s willingness to come to terms with imagining the unrepresentable, and being aware of one’s own inability to do so. The new painting induced the viewer to watch one’s self see, and to become ever more intimate with one’s own perception and cognitive mechanics.
Present Re-presentation

Paintings of the Abstract Sublime have been thinly categorized into mere formal experiments, i.e. Greenburg, at the expense of realizing the embedded content that
motivated them. The monochromatic paintings of American artists such as Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt and Fontana, were interested not so much with pictorial abstraction, but with *what it meant to be abstract*.

Contextually positioned after World War II, many of these painters were affected by the apocalyptic potential of the atomic bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Paintings of this time could be viewed as attempts to communicate what might have been, or might be, if such a calamity had occurred; they are attempting to present the unrepresentable, to paint the ‘other’ side of History. Some, such as Fontana, used allusions that actually depicted that ‘other’ almost matter-of-factly; his paintings were often monochromatic with slashes cutting through the canvas, revealing an indeterminate black Nothing behind. More indirectly, and apparent mostly through texts, the plain, abysmal and indeterminate color fields of other artists, such as Newman, were meant possibly to underscore the urgency of the ‘here and now’, that the sublime does not reside (in a naive, Romantic way), *over there*, (in some far away land of icebergs and gorges) but *is happening*; more clearly, that the world *has* the power to make what seems unimaginable, very real. Newman wrote that he was not trying to manipulate space or image in his work, put posit a sensation of time. "It is the color of his paintings that, as a (discreet, temporal) occurrence or event, is inexpressible, and it is to this that we must bear witness."

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15 Lyotard, pg. 37.
These painters were perhaps hoping to demystify ideas of transcendence with their indeterminate field paintings, giving autonomous, non-simulated examples of what is unrepresentable. Contemporary artist Eric Orr once noted that ‘Plato said that the weakness in art is that it imitates an imitation. Redress Plato by using no-questions-asked materials, e.g., fire, shadow, light, wind, radio, (or color), and so forth.’ They are not exhibiting a metaphorical example of the inexpressible, they are actually handing it over. In a co-relative way, it seems that by offering only a void for the viewer to grasp, instead of allowing them to easily, superficially agree with something, (like much of Romanticist work), the paintings of the Abstract Sublimists elude to the fact that all of the fictional grief that they expect to find is not there, safely contained in a canvas, but right out in the street from which they came. Orr suggests that art will indeed have less and less to do with specific objects, but more with an appreciation of what’s here, “I think it, (art), will eventually get to the way you look at things rather than the (special kinds of) things themselves.”

Artist Robert Smithson’s work of the 1970s can be selectively analyzed in this same vein, however disparate his mediums. His works dealing with entropic landscapes evoke a more urgent situation, using less abstract methodologies than those mentioned previously. This is perhaps most easily understood in his photographic document-text ‘narrative’ of Passaic, New Jersey, in which he revealed not any aesthetic the site may have owned, but rather the pronounced state of the existing detritus. His examination of this marginalized site, the refuse of industry and urban
sprawl, exposes not only a spatially airy landscape, (part of the area is an abandoned airstrip), but a cynical view of what ‘progress’ and modernization has earned us.

“Smithson’s sublime is real enough. Faced with the entropy of his world, such universal dissolution, he feels sufficient terror. His parody is meant, rather, to expose a certain weakness in the theory of the sublime, or to locate, perhaps, its postmodern turn. Before deserts, mountain, and storms, the sublime manifests itself as wholly other- (Other?). Before a pyramid, its is as if someone other than ourselves-someone larger than life-must have conceived and built what stands before us. But everything in Passaic, New Jersey, is we are certain, something we have made. It is as if we were watching our very undoing, not by the catastrophic forces of nature, but by our own hands.” 16

Not unlike what the painters of the Abstract Sublime alluded to with their autonomous paintings, Smithson points to a catastrophic ‘other’ that exists right now, and that is wholly, (perhaps fearfully), identifiable. It is this immediacy that beckons one to sort out a point of reference for themselves, within space and time. Rather than the object/site offering sublimity with any physical attributes, it is the implications of the Modern Machine and its totalizing effects that lend impact to the site. The banality of the pollution and decay are contrary to any bizarre monumentality of the pyramids, and the condition is probably very similar in many other parts of suburbia; the image of the site becomes overshadowed by the idea that inspired the place. Smithson bemoans: “There was nothing interesting or even strange about that flat

monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliche idea of infinity: perhaps the ‘secrets of the universe’ are just as pedestrian not to say dreary.”\textsuperscript{17}

Recently deserted Stapleton International Airport serves to define a state of entropy just as Passaic did for Smithson; perhaps through its stillness one can imagine the amount of work needed to build the 3 million square feet of building, the x-million cubic feet of concrete slab, the immensely complex and accurate system built to control planes landing and taking off- the millions of people that have been there, and the places that they have gone to. That it is now vacant allows one to imagine these things first lamentingly and then aweingly. It serves as “that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery-an alienated power, what Sartre calls the counterfinality of the practico-inert, which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Sayre, pg. 219.
\textsuperscript{18} Jameson, pg. 39.
Si(gh)te

The condition that led to the abandoned Stapleton International Airport in Denver, Colorado is indirectly indicative of current urban morphology and economics. The peripheralization of many American cities has led to the re-pastoralization of downtown areas, and the clustering of mega-structures around the surrounding ring roads. These corporate compounds and regional malls are most often separated by as of yet undeveloped land and interstate, exhibiting a type of continental oceanic shelf between the building and its landscape, (or parking lot in the case of the mall). Stapleton Airport was abandoned in favor of a larger port twenty miles further into the prairie. The latter is hoped to be an impetus for continued peripheral growth, much
like Stapleton was, and retail malls are currently doing. Stapleton, however peripheral when initially built, is peculiarly close to downtown Denver now, and has yet to be seriously speculated on, literally and figuratively. There are currently a handful of civic employees in charge of instigating the reuses of both the built infrastructure and the open tarmac, (although none with urban or ‘design’ backgrounds).

There is a 25 square mile military arsenal which is currently being reprogrammed as a public recreation area that the northern-most runway slides into. Almost puncturing it, the tip of the runway seems to be liberated from the hyper-manicured landscape in a way not unlike the planes leaving it; from that very spot both become unleashed into the wilds. To the west is fairly monotonous one-story, middle income tract housing, culminating with the downtown central business district about five miles away. The housing becomes more diluted and impoverished to the south with strip-retail mixed in, giving way to light industrial compounds to the west.

The land itself is roughly seven square miles with accompanying concrete tarmac ranging from 18 to 36 inches thick, and covering about 70% of it. The two main runways are spotted with sunken grass medians, which have depths of five to twenty feet below the line of concrete. These green pools are ‘negatives’ from which fill was taken to build up the foundation for the massive amounts of concrete and steel that make up the runway. As small, groomed pastures, the medians serve to drain the immense surface area, remaining as stunted oasis’ in dry weather.
The building complex consists of the semi-circular terminal with four arrival-departure concourses spider-_legging out from it, (two of which will be demolished because of out-dated safety compliances) ; a 5,000 car, five level parking garage nestled in the center of the compound; and dozens of wide-span hangar structures scattered around the terminal and throughout the site. As a diagram the buildings act parallel to the city it once performed for; the middle is a temporary car garage, the concentric terminal is a circulation route for traveling to and from departures on the periphery, and the concourses are the arterials that ultimately take you to your final destination whether that be a dream-state or another cities airport. The pastures are those unoccupied open spaces of suburbia and pseudo-hinterland that are only looked at, never used.

The somewhat ironic comparison of city to airport is interesting to note in the context of scalar issues in Kant's sublime. "When we judge such an immense whole, the sublime lies not so much in the magnitude of the number as in the fact that, the farther we progress, the larger are the unities we reach. This is partly due to the systematic division in the structure of the world edifice: for this division always presents to us whatever is large in nature as being small in turn, though what it actually presents to us is our imagination, in all its boundlessness..."19 As an autonomous machinic system, the airport is perhaps deducible in terms of function and componentry, yet the entire global working network, or matrix, of airports is at such a complex level of nuance and delicacy that it is impossible to 'cognitively map'.

19 Kant, pg. 113.
Similarly, cities have recognizable aerial forms, and it is possible to somewhat predict certain dynamics within it. However, to recognize the city as a whole system of diverging and liquid parts is impossible to grasp as a single entity.

Although the landscape of the Stapleton tarmac falls into effectual categories of Burke’s sublimity, (an illusion of infinity), the explicit history and definition of the place is undetachable. Failed are attempts to see or be in this place in an objective, empirical manner, and its perception becomes augmented by one’s knowing of what an airport should be. As Burke insisted on the autonomy of the natural scene in evoking the sublime, Kant emphasized that the mind was central in apprehending the sublime, thus shifting attention from physical nature to its perception. To know of the immense deliberation and energy required to make such a place could be considered sublime, yet to imagine it as extinguishable is to confront entropy itself. One can witness the work of technology, men and capital literally dissolve, at the same time feel and hear the blaring absence of this places occupation. As you speculate, space engulfs you, your vulnerability churning in it’s throat, wondering about it’s demise.

As Burke suggested, the sublime manifests itself when this entropy which threatens us is in some way suspended, kept at bay, held back. (The images of Turner for instance, often offer a peripherally sunlit pasture as relief to the usual abysmal canyons or ominous sky, a refuge to the calamitous image at hand, keeping it back or at bay.) Lyotard offers the remedial employment of art in to existential terms with entropy: “Here then is a breakdown of the sublime sensation: a very big, powerful

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object, (the airport) threatens to deprive the soul of any and all happenings, shuns it. The soul is dumb, immobilized, as good as dead. Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief. Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and life.”21 Perhaps, then, this Airport should be treated not as a mere ‘redevelopment’ or ‘re-use’ project, but as testimony to this creeping entropic condition that we can viscerally feel, yet attempt to tragically deny.

The Tarmac

To imagine being but one figure in the middle of five square miles of rubber streaked concrete, the silence ringing from only the ghosts of jet airplanes to imagine that one could even be out there would be nothing less than ‘astonishing’ as Burke would say. The site as an object of pure space offers a formalist definition of sublimity. The physical properties of a vacant international airport tarmac could, in the historical sense of sublime, be considered authentically; it’s vastness seems unaccommodating to human scale, perhaps even unnerving, or ‘terrifying’. (See Burke on Sections: Infinity, Vastness, The Sublime).
The problem, however, is not only that one is confronted by what can be considered a classically sublime site, but the problem of trying to index oneself within a much larger, albeit invisible, dilemma- one that beckons an exterior approach to the situation. More urgently, however, might be the ‘privation’ of what usually ‘happens’ at the airport- that this mega-machine has disappeared from the grounds and that nothing might re-inhabit it. “What is terrifying is that the ‘It happens such’ will not happen, that it will stop happening.” 22

Can there be a parallel between the urgency of Otherly depiction so yearned for by the Romantics and Abstract Sublimists, and the conundrum that one finds themselves in upon attempting to apprehend the invisible, stunted potentialities of an abandoned airport? In the former, there was an attempt to represent what was unrepresentable using what seemed appropriate allusions of natural indeterminateness. Would it not be comparable to portray and witness a vacant international airport from the middle of a two mile long runway?

This experience would at once beckon the subject to conceptualize what is absent and, perhaps performing a retro-loop of some sort, reawaken a post-modern/mortem corporeal presence. The re-inscription of the figure as an agent of affect, rather than as reflexive armature, is similar to what Burke assumed in his early treatise, and would be indispensable in experientially consuming the tarmac environment.

22 Lyotard, pg. 41.
Global Mall-atrix

As a reuse of the airport structure, and a comparable mega-system of quantitative sublimity, I have proposed a (mutated) shopping mall. Perhaps a pedestrian vehicle to portray the ideas of Kant and Lyotard, it in some ways epitomizes the pinnacle of the technology/capital dynamic, portrayed in maximum-overdrive. Margaret Crawford suggests in her conclusion from her essay concerning mallization, that, "the
world of the shopping mall—respecting no boundaries, no longer limited even by the
imperative of consumption—has become the world.”

A post-World War II phenomenon, the first proven model of the mall was built in
Seattle in 1947. The circumstances under which it was built can be overlaid on the
diagram of the city of Denver, and most other American cities. Motivated by the
freedom of the automobile and resultant efficiency of the highway system, the
peripheralization of demographics beckoned retail to follow. The resultant suburbia
ultimately led to the concentric highway lines that, simplistically, reveal the
rudimentary dynamics of the city. Margaret Crawford illustrates this neatly in
reference to Northgate. The dumbbell format, what was to become the mall typology,
was made of “two department stores anchoring the ends of an open-air pedestrian mall, set
in the middle of acres of parking. The innovative combination of easy automobile access and
free parking with pedestrian shopping offered both suburban convenience and downtown
selection. A narrow pedestrian corridor modeled after a downtown street, efficiently funneled
shoppers from one department store to the other, taking them past every store in the mall.
Similar multi-million-dollar malls multiplied, spurred on by the abundance of cornfield sites
at agricultural-land prices and encouraged by Reilly’s Law O Retail Gravitation, which posits
that, all other factors being equal, shoppers will patronize the largest shopping center they can
get to easily. This served as the rationale for ever-larger centers optimally located near the

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exits of new interstate highways.” 24 The history and circumstances of the mall are elaborately depicted in this essay and breach the parameters of this investigation. However understated here, the omnipresence of the mall can be felt globally. Rather than following demographic dynamics, malls are now themselves the impetus for economic growth and movement; attractors of capital, residents and tourism. “the mall has transcended its shopping-center origins. Today, hotels, office buildings, cultural centers, and museums virtually duplicate the layouts and formats of shopping malls.”25 In this sense the mall becomes not only a local, unique theme-park of bizarre fantasy, but also a built idea. This notion can be clarified by looking at the fairly simple morphology of malls.

The basic typological structure of the mall type is dependent on a system of ‘nodes and links.’ The former are the programmatic and formal intersections and junctions that are consistently separated by 600 foot intervals, or links. They serve as primary points of arrival and departure, maximum, prime frontage zones for retail, access to information and money (phone ‘bars’, credit card operated fax machines and ATMs), and even collective spaces- although not public ones. The node spaces may front on one of the hub, or magnet department stores, or be hierarchically broken down to secondary respite zones. The generic dumbbell mall plan, for instance, will have two magnet stores at either end of 600 foot long link, or arcade. The nodes would be in

24 Crawford, pg. 20.
25 Crawford, pg. 29.
front of these attractors, with side malls leading to entrances approximately 100 feet each way on either side.  

Ironically, although anathema to the city in terms of its insularity and dilutive powers, the (myopic) model for contemporary malls is the traditional city itself. Research by Barry Maitland reveals that the source of the this nodal system is derivative of medieval townships. With surprising consistency, the collective landmarks of these towns—piazzas, churches, fountains—are usually separated by the same distance that mall nodes are. This distance is supposedly the ‘comfort’ threshold within which the common pedestrian shopper will not feel overextended. From one ‘mall-developer guide comes the explanation, “Experience has shown that there is a maximum distance of about 200-250 meters which shoppers are prepared to travel from one focal point to another. If distances are greater than this, they tend to lose interest and fail to complete the journey.” This is not a unique supposition within mall literature, and has been installed as a protocol design gesture quite prolifically. (Indeed the pedestrian node and link system has entered the domain of downtown areas, often having nothing to do with existing systems of streets or landmarks, i.e. Houston, Cincinnati, and Montreal.)

Information concerning its urban maliciousness and escapism, insidious consumer-manipulation techniques, and the general demential image that the mall speaks of, is

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27 Maitland, pg. 124. (from a generic shopping mall design guide printed by Northen and Haskoll, 1977)
depthless. What is of paramount importance for my investigation, is that these new centers of economic activity may seem solipsistic within their local context, yet are broadly connected together through their relentless, singular purpose. "Their activity, (economic, social), is not inherent, but induced; they offer goods and services superfluous to daily need; their environment enthusiastically embraces 'pretense and fakery'; their novelty and sense of quality are self-consciously cultivated; they have little real meaning in their urban context. (other footnote about how they eat the area around them.) The fact is that they were, or are, not as Jane Thompson would have preferred, the expression of some deeply rooted urban culture, but rather a response to surplus suburban wealth."  

Malls are autonomous machines that operate within an economic formula, and are hence co-operative with the greater force of global, multinational capitalism. The capitalist incubator from which the mall is spawned is itself an infinite operation, requiring the perpetual remaking of merchandise and markets. "There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it denies nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea- infinite wealth and power. It does not provide any example from nature that might verify this Idea. In subordinating science through technologies, it only succeeds in making reality appear increasingly intangible, subject to doubt, unsteady."  

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28 Maitland, pg. 71.
29 Lyotard, pg. 43.
The mall’s representative component of this system is the ubiquitous node; not as physical space, but as a program of pure idea. Malls can be found now in cities all around the world, and it is not unlikely that one would find many of the same stores, and even ‘design’, in all of them. A nodal area in Berlin and Ottawa may not only have both Bennetton and Banana Republic chain outlets, (often the largest chains will command the high-exposure window area of nodes) but also compatible automated-teller machines, facsimile machines and phone banks. They become even less discernible in lieu of what Maitland refers to as their ‘induced’ atmospheres; as these veritable theme parks are usually anti-contextual and artificial, the environments are potentially interchangeable and universal. Recalling the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta, Canada, one of the biggest, Crawford recounts what was said at the opening ceremony by one of the investors, “atop the (simulated) Santa Maria, Nader Ghermezian shouted in triumph, ‘What we have done means you don’t have to go to New York or Paris or Disneyland or Hawaii. We have it all here for you in one place!’ The implausible, seemingly random, collection of images, and sights has been assembled with an explicit purpose: to support the mall’s claim to contain the entire world within its walls.”\(^{30}\) The mall, already an omnipresent phenomenon, also has desires of omniscience.

Perhaps it is possible to approach the node as a discreet surfacing, or intensification, of capitalist and computational motifs. It is where the ephemeral and ambient informational network surge up and willfully discombobulates the subject. At the

\(^{30}\) Crawford, pg. 4.
mercy of this 'mode of information', Mark Poster describes “a subject that is no longer located in a point in absolute time/space, enjoying a physical, fixed vantage point from rationally to calculate its options. Instead it is multiplied by databases, dispersed by computer messaging and conferencing, decontextualized and reidentified by TV ads, dissolved and materialized continuously in the electronic transmission of symbols.” 31 These contemporary afflictions come to an aggressive head within consumer outposts such as the mall, in which one is literally bombarded with them. (The information is not necessarily liberating for the subject, such as it is for the freely wandering rhizomatic 'nomad' that Deleuze and Guattari write about, but rather diluting and confusing. Indeed there exist specific retail techniques that 'scientifically' explain and supposedly alter one's buying attitude.)

**Projections:**

Attempting to re-assemble the mall typology into one that re-introduced a re-oriented subject, the node became a point of departure. The mall node could be generalized as emblematic of a Kantian, and Jamesonian neo-sublime, in which the visceral body is so much as ineffectual; over-riding the perceptual, the senses are deadened by 'hyper-stims', which pulverize the conceptual faculties into malleable splunge. In regards to the empty tarmac, it's daunting scale and depthless spatiality is defined more readily by Burke, and its potent vacancy and entropy more so by Lyotard, evident in the work of Smithson. In suggesting that the tarmac, with its 'tangible' sublimity, is perhaps

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more able to offer an opportunity of orientation, or location, it may also include a place of refuge for a ‘de-stabilized’ subject. Hence the project became a collapsing of these two different spaces of sublimity; that of the ‘great’ stretches of concrete tarmac, and the infinite ‘global network of capital.’

Attempts of representing this network literally have come to pass in fiction, such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* or Stephen King’s pseudo-kitsh movie “Lawnmower Man”, in which there are suggestions of what a ‘virtual network’ environment might be like to viscerally experience. Jameson, however, sees these attempts as thinly disguised gropings at trying to puncture the entirely non-visual domain of ‘post-industrial’ space. ‘... our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new de-centered global network of the third stage of capital itself.”

It is my assertion that if a confrontation with this ‘de-centered global network’ can be at the same time overlaid on an experience that gives a visual, and visceral affect from the same (sublime) machine, then one might be given an opportunity to better

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32 Jameson, pg. 38.
'orientate' and stabilize themselves within it. The combinatorial scenario might be like this: you can be in, or actually be, the mall node, that emblem of capital itself, while extracting information directly from it, (phone, fax, ATM, etc...), hovering in mid-air above an visually indeterminate entropic landscape, and all the time being hyper-aware of your weight, and balance- your very spatial disposition. The mall itself gets turned inside-out, and then back in again-through you.

Or imagine being alone on the tarmac, now a huge empty parking lot- the 'island-in-the-sea-of-asphalt' syndrome gone awry, leaving one a mere Lilliputian amongst the 1000 foot long parking spaces. At night the ground is spark-bolted by the unwavering blue and orange and red of the taxi lights, your rollerblades having replaced the 60 inch tires of the absent jetplanes.

The disjunction between BIG SPACE and BIG BUILDINGS, is mediated not with any formal transitional maneuvering, but through an Idea. The mediator itself is BIG, yet it requires an anthropocentric activation, such that the subject is again part of the relationship between inside and outside; he is everything and everywhere. Rather than looking at the juxtaposition as a dialectic, perhaps it can be viewed as a non-heirarchical tripartite schema that allows a re-inscription of the body as integral to its functioning.
An uncoloring of an Airport within Denver, and Denver within an Airport.
“The problem was to plan the disappearance of the subject, to cancel the anguish caused by the pathetic (or ridiculous) resistance of the individual to the structures of domination that close in upon him, to indicate the voluntary and docile submission to those structures of domination as the promised land of universal planning.” Manfred Tafuri.
"The site is but a dot in the vast infinity of universes, an imperceptible point in a cosmic immensity, a speck in an impenetrable nowhere—all real art reflects to a degree this vastness."

Robert Smithson
Sublimation, in the alchemist sense of the word, is a process whereby a substance is converted by heating it and then cooling it down to a refined product. (definition)
The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality.

Words, even when they speak of the desert, are always unwelcome. Jean Baudrillard.
"the implicit model for larger-scale shopping center projects in this century has been the city itself." Maitland, pg. 115.

9.10 or as a cellular pattern of organisation, based upon the node squares (left).
9.11 The primary diagram can be intensified by intermediate nodes and routes (right).

7.1 Generic diagram of node structure for twin-magnet, or dumb-bell, shopping centre plan.
Place in the United States today no longer exists, or, more precisely, it exists at a much feebler level, surcharged by all kinds of other more powerful but also more abstract spaces. By these last I mean not only Los Angeles, (or Denver, or Houston), as some new hyper-urban configuration, but also the increasingly abstract (and communicational) networks of American reality beyond, whose extreme form is the power network of so-called multinational capitalism. As individuals, we are in and out of all these overlapping dimensions all the time, something that makes an older kind of existential positioning of ourselves in Being exceedingly problematic." Frederic Jameson, pg. 127.
Void to Void: Installation of miniature Node diagram superimposed onto Anderson Hall.
Foyer=Tarmac+Indeterminateness, Aperture= doorway to absent node, Bridge=new shopping lane/node link, Working Student Phone = stand-in node + network entry.
...and a driveway for your backyard. (suburban house parasite feeding off mall and tarmac.)
Turner’s Sublime': notice emergency exit.
Floating NITE-LITE LINES: Nodal View.

SUBurban house studies, mall extrusions
I Land in the See. Desert-ed, Parking, Lots of *everything*.
Fast IN-stallation in In-determinate space.
Binary Similarities.
From the City

The tongue
Did burst
Into a Bloody Word.
Unlost,
It stared
Back into
The mouth
From whence it came.
We shall
Never be the same.
After the cross
Nothing is lost.
At the bottom
Of the city
This is all.
At the top
Of the city,
This is all.
From a ruptured
Blood vessel
Comes a prayer
A sorry sight
Upon the dark night;
While a dog barked at the moon
No prayers tonight.
We have better things to do.
Joining with the myth of the machine,
The rebel expects to be damned.
By rest,
To be saved
Is passe.
We shall fly to Rome
In an aeroplane.
Flying, flying...

-Robert Smithson
Puncturing the Void; into the foyer, into the tarmacway...each 'puncture in the new mall is programmatically equipped to take you somewhere; whether it me a cineplex, post-office, library, ATM, Stair-master- they're all here.
In front, behind, the MALLWALL is thick, but this one has pierces and slices; spaces that let you go somewhere.
The tube to Anywhere- The tube to *Everywhere.*
The ends of Newman: color may be Now, but the rocking chairs go on and on...
A sparkling stripe on the ground, a very big parking spacer, and a deep stripe in the air—*it goes on forever.*
The stores are turned awry 90 degrees, making five or six *really* long stores.
An extruded library, (disguised as a store), sliding forward to give the ice-rink some snow. This is where the old node used to be—now null and Void.
Calling home from your OWNODE, watching ants on the wall...outside.
Looking across the stadium, where another old node used to be.
Library shelves- you can stand on almost everything here.
Columns of (INFRA)structure, holding you up, putting you on hold. (Note: this column really *does* hold you up, as well as the building.)
Looking up from your chlorine filled eyes; don't splash the books. This is the melted ice-rink. The "adjacent attraction" principle in affect.
A big parking lot with no cars and no handicap restrictions.
What's behind this? and where does it go? ATM ADreinhardt.
Going faaaaast, rounding the corner.
Climbing the tarmac, walking the wall, stamping in the foundation. (The biggest artificial climbing wall in the world: The Rock n' Roll MALLWALL.)
Measurable lengths give Mr. Smithson comfort and certainty when pondering the infinite... Mr. Borges, however, thinks it's a 'swamp monster.'
Xeroxing Lyotard seems appropriate:

Robert Irwin below.)

(Robert Irwin below.)
...through the desireing machine, through the wall, through the Boreal climbing shoe; into sublimity, into entropy, into you... "To turn away from this principle—that infinity is inherent in the very dialectic of search—is absurd, impractical, and reactionary. The spirit of the times is not that of the merely pleasant; its mission remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to the nondemonstrable.” Ibid.
Bibliography


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