Bukdahl, Else Marie. "Figuration and 'Aesthetics of the Sublime': Aspects of Their Interplay in Christian Art." *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires*. Ed. Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016. 229–244. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350078666.0023>>.

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Figuration and 'Aesthetics of the Sublime': Aspects of Their Interplay in Christian Art

Else Marie Bukdahl

In the Western world, artworks have often been regarded as visualizations of pre-established ideas and concepts, so it is understandable that church art has frequently been interpreted as a precise artistic representation of the biblical texts and other texts relating to ecclesiastical history (cf. Banning 1980: 124–34). However, artists from Leonardo da Vinci to Wassily Kandinsky have always been aware that the language of form can communicate experiences and knowledge that the written and spoken word are either unable to express adequately or simply cannot capture. The word never coincides with the artistic expression. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlines in an original and clear manner how artists are able to visualize perspectives and reveal traces and significances that philosophers and scientists cannot grasp with their tools alone. He quotes Leonardo da Vinci, who maintained that there is a special knowledge expressed in what he called a 'pictorial science', which does not speak with words (and still less with numbers) but with *oeuvres*, which exist in the visible just as natural things do and which nevertheless communicate through those things 'to all the generations of the universe' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 186).

Merleau-Ponty adds that Rainer Maria Rilke calls the 'pictorial science' of Leonardo 'a silent science' which 'brings into oeuvre the forms of things whose seal has not been broken' – it comes from the eye and addresses itself to the eye. We must regard the eye as the 'window of the soul' (1964: 186). Furthermore, artists and aestheticians have often emphasized that visual art has a greater openness than the so-called logocentric disciplines in which concepts and categories have a prominent place. Visual art as idiom opens up a field that concepts must necessarily restrict. And visual art may also contain a more open view than even its 'sister genre', poetry, can communicate. Finally, visual art also has a particular, expressive power because it engages all the senses, the imagination, reason and often the entire body in a very direct way.

Since the earliest development of Christian art¹, prominent artists have tried to find an answer to a fundamental artistic and theological question: How can one represent the unrepresentable, that is, the holy, the paradox of faith, the Trinity, the resurrection of the flesh, or the coming of the Holy Ghost? The biblical Hebrew legislation against idolatry has been regarded by most artists, not as a ban, but as a challenge and an expression of the acknowledgement that attempts to depict the sacred by means of

a human figure, or a representation of scenes from the everyday world, renders the unrepresentable to become limited, indeed often completely determined by mundane ideas and concepts. It is therefore difficult for the beholder to understand that the sacred, or the divine, is supposed to be different, lies beyond the human sphere of power, reason and imaginative abilities, to give the world new meaning and open up new perspectives.

The violent conflict that arose during the eighth and ninth centuries between iconoclasts and iconolaters may be regarded as sharply delineated interpretations of the biblical law against idolatry. The iconoclasts wanted to banish visual art from the interiors of churches. They feared it might tempt churchgoers to worship images and lead to a profanation of the sacred. The iconolaters emerged victorious, but the debate provoked by this conflict continued over the centuries that followed – although in less dramatic form – and continues to this day. This debate has always created new orientations in the aesthetic debate and in visual art. It constitutes a recurrent theme of past as evidenced in artworks like Caspar David Friedrich's landscape paintings from the period of German romanticism, Gianfranco Baruchello's paintings from the 1960s and in Jean-François Lyotard's philosophy from the 1980s (Bukdahl 2005: 11–13; Bukdahl 2016: 128–30, Figure 1).

The image ban and medieval, Renaissance and baroque art

The great artists who left their imprint on the churches of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the baroque were well aware that there was a major difference between the preaching of the gospel and their own visual interpretations of scripture. They saw clearly, for example, that a human figure modelled by a visual artist could engender fixed ideas to a far greater degree than interpretations of human beings and gods conveyed in language. This is because language is capable of suggesting an idea, for example, of God's power of creation and love, without describing God as a person from the everyday reality.

With the aim of avoiding the restrictive bonds of the image – and the pitfalls of recognizability – the artists have often captured or indicated the divine by means of abstract or non-figurative artistic effects, which produce openings in fixed patterns of ideas and interpretation. They have used sculptural devices, like a veil, for example, to reduce the similarity to the human body, or painterly idioms that created planes of colour and transitions, which achieved their effect mainly by means of their own fullness of expression. The most important factor has, however, always been light, with its rapidly changing modulations that continually create new contexts and new perspectives – both in works of art and in their interplay with architecture. Light is ubiquitous; it sweeps darkness aside. Light comes to everyday environments and penetrates everything, but humans cannot seize it, nor can they control it. Similarly, God's love is thought to permeate the common world; it is omnipresent, but it is beyond the human sphere of power.

In the stained-glass windows of Gothic churches the beholder is confronted with scenes from scripture and from legends of the saints. But artists have placed them so

high up on the walls that the intensely bright blue, red and golden areas often blur the narrative elements and create an abundance of light, which both unites and radiates an aura of transfiguration over church architecture and its visual art. It is precisely this wealth of light that becomes a symbolic expression of God's omnipresent love or 'the city [that] had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it' (Rev. 21.23).

The monk Theophilus was one of the few artists in the Middle Ages to describe the view of the art of his time.² The central element in it was – as in Byzantine art – the creation of an expressive language of form capable of visualizing the spiritual dimension, especially the paradox of faith. He emphasized that God's Paradise, God Himself and the risen Christ can best be visualized through an almost celestial play of light and colour, what Theophilus called 'the radiant splendor of the pieces of glass and the manifold qualities of the priceless craftsmanship', along with various abstract elements of ornamentation. And if 'the eye of man [...] marks the abundance of light from the windows, it admires the inestimable beauty of the glass and the variety of the costliest work' (Holt 1957: 8), which provides a sense of the presence of God.

This medieval theory of light, which originated in a metaphysical world view, is visualized in works like the North Rose of Chartres Cathedral (about 1235) and in the North Rose of Notre Dame in Paris (1250–60). The light streaming through these glass windows is so powerful that it volatilizes the small figures in small squares and circles with the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus in the centre of both rosettes. It is thus the light that is the central signifying power. In the western bays on the south side of the nave in the Chartres Cathedral, featuring the top of the arcade, the *triforum* and the clerestory glass windows, one can clearly see how much the colourful light dominates the biblical scenes and figures.

The glass windows, which glow like jewels, pouring vivid colours onto the floor of the cathedral, create an impression of a curtain of light, symbolic of Christ's love for his followers. In these two Gothic cathedrals, it is first and foremost the light entering the church space from the stained-glass paintings that unifies the architecture and sculpture in a visionary unity. The light represents the newly resurrected Christ, seen not as a judge, but as the light of the world and its saviour. The intense light space of the church is to give the eye, the thoughts and the mind an impression of this in a way that the written or spoken word is unable to express with the same strength, and which can also not be conveyed through images from the world. This is to evoke the divine creative power and the love of God, which is shown to cast a transfigurative light over the lives of the audiences.

The great Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci also saw this perspective. He called God 'the light of all things', and appointed the visual artist as 'the explorer of light'. Throughout his life Leonardo tried to find the order, or the whole, that was the fundamental structure 'in the splendid book that lies open before our eyes: the cosmos' (Monty 1953: 42). But his last series of biblical drawings, for example *The Deluge* or *Visions of the End of the World* (1514–15) (Figure 13.1), which contains a labyrinthine network of local orders and perspectives leading into an infinite space, reveals that his search remained fruitless. Dynamic, spiralling movements reminiscent of powerful waves throw stone fragments around in the open pictorial space. Trees are crushed and

Figure 13.1 *The Deluge. Visions of the End of the World*, Leonardo da Vinci. 1514–15. Drawing on paper. Pen and black ink with wash. 162 × 203 mm. Royal Collection, Great Britain. Leonardo da Vinci (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons.

appear to be moving out of the lower half of the pictorial space. This is undoubtedly a visualization of the idea that the world will end in a massive flood, which will blot out all life on earth. But these drawings also reveal that in his final years Leonardo became convinced that neither the divine nor the end of the world could be summed up in a single concept, expressed by a single image or visualized in a clear figurative language. The non-figurative pictorial language may be interpreted as the bearing element in the drawing, communicating a powerful impression that the spectators are facing the end of the world.

A similar experience often pervaded the period that followed, the baroque, giving rise to the creation of images that were conceived independently of natural forms or the ideals of antiquity and were therefore able to reveal new aspects of scripture and highlight the divine by means of bold architectural and artistic devices. This characteristic emerges particularly in Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's paintings and Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini's sculptures. In baroque art, light is used to render God's power and Christ's love visible. It often comes from a source that is difficult to identify and moves in dramatic circles and spirals, pushing aside the deep darkness. This powerful light is highly visible in *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (1601) by Caravaggio. He dramatizes the precise moment when Saul falls off his horse and lies on the ground, blinded by the light emanating from Christ, who is not present as a figure, but who

appears as a voice, talking to him. The intense waves of light reveal the result of Christ's activity – the conversion of Saul, who later became Paul the Apostle.

An astonishing number of artworks contain multiple layers of meaning. For example, Caravaggio's *The Conversion of Saint Paul* requires special knowledge, of the Bible and ecclesiastical history. This knowledge occupied an increasingly diminished role in cultural life during the Age of Enlightenment and in the ensuing centuries. Today it features almost exclusively in ecclesiastical contexts. Unlike words, however, images have a dimension that is immediately accessible. Both figurative and non-figurative art is imbued with presence and intensity and can, in principle, be experienced by all, irrespective of individual or cultural background.

The Conversion of Saint Paul – which has moved and inspired thousands of churchgoers and other visitors from all layers of society – may arouse in those without knowledge of its biblical background an experience of a strange event, which enters into their daily lives, arouses their imaginations and opens new perspectives. A level of figurative experience like this can be found, but only in a weaker version, also in writing, for example, in Arabic or Chinese poetry and the typographical experiments of 'concrete poetry', such as the works of Guillaume Apollinaire. The encounter with texts of this kind can – even if one is unable to read them – create an experience of beauty, but they still lack the presence and intensity of visual art.

In the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1614–52) by Bernini, Teresa and the angel are also illuminated by an intense light, which filters through a hidden window in the dome of the surrounding aedicule, and is underscored by gilded stucco rays: 'The supernatural event of Teresa's vision is raised to a sphere of its own, removed from that of the beholder, mainly by virtue of the isolating canopy and the heavenly light' (Whittkower 1980: 160). Teresa's passionate experience of religious ecstasy is visualized in the highly complex, almost abstract network of folds in the drapery, which renders her body almost invisible. Christ is only represented by the powerful light.

However, the art of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the baroque also reveals that both sculptors and painters were convinced that the evangelical accounts of Christ's life on earth could be rendered visible by artistic representations of scenes from the ordinary human world. For these artists, it was a fundamental idea in Christendom that Christ became a human being unto his death – wholly and completely – and was familiar with the many facets of human life, including despair and suffering. However, the depictions of the surrounding world created by artists like Titian, Leonardo, Bernini and Caravaggio were never conventional or traditional. This is because they embraced artistic interpretations of their own era's latest advances in natural science, which they had often created or developed themselves – for example, studies of anatomical dissections, breakthroughs in the science of colour, the development of linear perspective in the Renaissance and the baroque's concept of infinite space. The artists wanted no doubt to show that the gospels address a world undergoing constant transformation determined by continuous conflicts between chaos and order. The beholder was therefore enabled to understand that the Christian message was not confined within traditional limits, but was always able to withstand the penetrating light and challenges of contemporaneity. This applies to works like Titian's dramatic painting, *Crowning with Thorns* (1542), in which the viewer's involvement is

inescapable. Viewers are confronted with a very dramatic and brutal scene in which two soldiers violently twist the crown onto Jesus's head using canes. By employing vivid, luminous tints of colour, vibrant, loose brushwork, subtle tones and the forceful modelling of the figures, Titian sought to demonstrate that Jesus was a human being right up to his death and who, for the sake of humankind, suffered the pains and mortality that belong to the world. Titian also interpreted the old biblical story in his own intense Renaissance idiom. His contemporary audiences could thus experience the story as having currency and relevance for themselves.

Artists such as Caravaggio produced interpretations of the gospels, which shattered the familiar concepts of the world and Christianity held by priests and believers, who were sometimes offended and demanded that the works be removed. Mostly, however, this was not the case. Caravaggio's monumental painting, *Madonna of the Pilgrims* (1603–4), was placed in Sant'Agostino in Rome. The elite of Rome were shocked when they saw that the dirty soles of the man's feet were so close to the spectator that they could not avoid looking at them, but the painting remained in place. Caravaggio wanted to highlight the fact that this pilgrim and his wife were very common and contemporary people, with whom the viewers could identify. Madonna and the little Jesus look like they could be a Roman mother and her child. But their elevated position and the mysterious *clair obscur* remove them slightly from the human world, discreetly revealing that they are holy persons who love and take care of humankind.

Burke's and Kant's concept of 'the sublime'

During the eighteenth century, the age of the Enlightenment, the ideal of the clear light of reason and empirical, scientific method occupied a prominent position. As a result, conventional Christian mythology and morals were ousted from their previously dominant position. Christianity nevertheless managed to retain a quite dominant position, but only through its being 'modernized'. Cultural and political life became increasingly independent from ecclesiastical life, gradually emerging as autonomous social fields. The many connecting strands between Christian art and advances in the fields of philosophy and art that had left their mark on the earlier periods became less pronounced.

In the mid-1800s, however, Edmund Burke, in his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), questioned the optimistic belief of his contemporaries that humans, by applying reason, could acquire an exhaustive understanding of the world and gain control of it. It was especially his portrayal of 'the sublime' as a 'sentiment or a passion' and a boundary-transgressing experience that was in focus. Burke pointed out that everything the imagination cannot sum up in a single impression – the darkness of night, the wide-open space and the 'infinity' – arouses a sensation or 'a feeling of the sublime'. The very fact that these attempts to synthesize fail abysmally evokes 'horror' and 'terror'. But this 'terror' is mingled with a sensation of 'delight' because 'the terror-causing threat becomes suspended'; and because it reveals new experiences and ways of looking at our world, that have so many uncovered perspectives. Through an interpretation of what he called 'the sublime', Burke found that humans are incapable, either through their imagination or through their reason, of understanding and controlling the world.³

At the end of the century, Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), was the first to connect the determination of 'the sublime' with the biblical law against picturing God. He was convinced that 'the sublime' could best be exemplified by biblical ideas of non-figurative representation. Because, by forbidding ancient believers to create images of their God, their imagination, or *Einbildungskraft*, was not limited. They had a clear understanding that the sacred, or God, could not be contained or visualized by a human figure from our world. Kant argues that there is therefore 'no more sublime passage in Judaic law than the prohibition of idolatry insofar as one is called, in the name of the tradition, to inventively rupture the tradition' (Keenan 2005: 175).⁴

An encounter, for example, with the vast firmament, the wind-swept sea, the absolutely great or divine, everything the imagination cannot conceive within a single image, arouses an experience of 'the sublime'. For Kant, one's inability to grasp the grandeur of 'the sublime', like experiencing an earthquake, thus demonstrates the inadequacy of one's sensibility and imagination. Or in his own words: 'The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense' (Kant 1986: 98).

According to the interpretation of Løgstrup, what awakens a sense of 'the sublime' around us and within us is thus what threatens us, what we cannot measure and what we cannot surmount, but which frees our abilities – our reason and will – within us. It is these abilities, in particular, which elevate humans above nature:

It is, in some sense, a power struggle that takes place. In nature we suffer defeats, physical and sensual, where power is crushed, our imaginative ability fails, but reason and ethics prevail. The duality of the feeling of 'the sublime' is defeat and victory, aversion and desire. (Løgstrup 1965: 103)

Reason is thus able to perceive the crisis of imagination and conceive an idea of the activity of 'the sublime'.

The challenge for the visual artist is thus how to depict the infinite, the absolute, the sacred, or other phenomena that produce an experience of 'the sublime', or of grandeur. Kant posited his aesthetic of 'the sublime' mostly on the experience of nature (Meredith 1986: 109–11). But he may also have had in mind that artistic effects, which have no association with existing figurative concepts, can indicate what is impossible to summarize in a single impression or in an image – the absolute or the divine. Exposing 'the sublime' allows an opening or a fractured surface to emerge, which can never be sealed or healed, thus registering the fact that here was something humans could not grasp, that limits have been established for their imagination and senses, but that human abilities like reason and will have been liberated.

The Italian philosopher Mario Perniola stressed that Kant's definition of 'the sublime' is the core in what he calls 'a theological aesthetics':

However theological aesthetics takes its roots in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* just where he distinguishes the sublime from the beautiful: whereas the beautiful implies a sensitive form which is adequate for human faculties, so that it seems to be predisposed to our judgement, the sublime cannot be held in any sensitive form, so that it is enjoyed not for its correspondence to the interest

of senses, but for its opposition. Therefore, we can find in the sublime an aesthetic experience which implies a sort of transcendence regarding the world. The sublime is conceived differently by Kant and by Hegel: according to the former only nature allows us to experience the sublime, whereas according to the latter it is linked with the form of symbolic art. (Perniola 1955: 22)

Perniola believes that Kant's concept of 'the sublime' should be the core of a theological aesthetic, because 'the sublime' – in contrast to 'beauty' – is not expressed through a 'sensitive form' and is also not experienced via the senses. 'The sublime' refers to the infinite, 'that is why it is reason that is set into motion, because it casts out its ideas of what lies beyond the reach of our senses' (Løgstrup 1965: 104). The experience of 'the sublime' therefore opens up encounters with the divine, the holy and the various metaphysical dimensions. And experiences arising from the encounter with 'the sublime' liberate the artist from any dependence on traditional art forms. And in attempting to present the unrepresentable, he or she achieves new artistic experience and creates new visual principles, which also provide possibilities for interpreting Christian themes in a new way.

The concept of 'the sublime' and new breakthroughs in modern church art

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries new departures in the visual arts took place to a marked degree in non-religious art – this is above all the area in which interpretations of innovations arose in cultural and social life and in the natural sciences. But striking exceptions do exist, for example, in the Christian art by Eugène Delacroix, Henri Matisse and Emil Nolde.

Various interpretations of Burke's and Kant's definitions of 'the sublime' also appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the new millennium every time philosophical systems, political ideologies or dogmatic aesthetic outlooks blocked the possibility of innovation in the art world and particularly new interpretations of Christian art. In the field of philosophy it was positivism, among others, which blocked advancements of this kind. Positivism is a theory that confines itself to the data of experience and excludes metaphysical systems and religion. And in the field of aesthetics, notions like art for art's sake hindered the emergence of advancements in the exploration of the metaphysical and religious aspects of art. This art theory required art to avoid social, political, moral and religious themes and concentrate instead on the creation of beauty.

It is precisely because 'the sublime' is associated with biblical aniconism and involves the religious dimension of the artistic and cultural environment that figurative art's ability to visualize the divine was subjected to renewed scrutiny. The emergence of non-figurative art in the second decade of the twentieth century provided new opportunities for interpreting the divine. These possibilities were further developed in the decades that followed. In addition, the encounter with 'the sublime' directed the gaze out towards the infinite space, made old rules disappear and provided space for

new breakthroughs in both art and culture. Finally, the encounter with 'the sublime' also creates a new understanding of the fact that we cannot control our world, and thus contains an indirect criticism of things like the new theories of the 'control society', which were advanced at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the new millennium (Deleuze 1990: 240–7).

Of course, the artists of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries working with interpretation of biblical and ecclesiastical themes occupy a varied, partly Protestant, partly Catholic foundation and with different artistic approaches. And this theological and artistic foundation departs quite significantly from the previously described conditions in the theological and artistic fields that the artists worked under prior to the Age of Enlightenment. But it was in the Renaissance in particular and in the following centuries that artists all shared their pursuit of answers to the question of which demands could be made of the Christian art of their time to avoid it being completely upstaged by images belonging to a bygone era. These artists, who created new artistic departures, aspired to make art that would be seen to have currency and relevance for a contemporary audience, one only has to think of Titian's *Crowning with Thorns* (1542), *The Conversion of Saint Paul* by Caravaggio, Caspar David Friedrich's romantic *Cross in the Mountains* (Tetschen Altar) (1808), Emil Nolde's expressionist *Life of Christ* (1911–12) and Gerhard Richter's non-figurative stained-glass window in Cologne cathedral (2007), for example.

An artist who became very involved in this discussion about 'the sublime' was Barnett Newman, a Jewish American painter who, together with Marc Rothko, created a striking new departure in the 1950s, which has had far-reaching consequences. In his paintings and writing he presented an original interpretation of 'the sublime' and its roots in the Hebrew Bible. In 1948, in an article entitled 'The Sublime Is Now', he wrote that, because

the Greek dream prevails in our time, the European artist is nostalgic for the ancient forms, hoping to achieve tragedy by depicting his self-pity over the loss of the elegant column and the beautiful profile. [...] Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life', we are making [them] out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without nostalgic glasses of history. (O'Neill 1990: 170, 173)

Between 1958 and 1966 Newman created his monumental work *Stations of the Cross*, inspired by the words uttered by Christ on the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' The work consists of a cycle of fourteen pictures (Figure 13.2). But 'Why fourteen? Why not one painting?' asks Barnett Newman. To this he answers:

The Passion is not a protest but a declaration. I had to explore its emotional complexity. That is, each painting is total and complete by itself, yet only the fourteen together make clear the wholeness of the single event. [...] I wished no monuments, no cathedrals. I wanted human scale for the human cry. [...] The cry, the unanswerable cry, is world without end. But a painting has to hold it, world without end, in its limits. (O'Neill 1990: 190)

Figure 13.2 The 14 pictures from *The Stations of the Cross*, Barnett Newman, 1958–66. Magna or oil on canvas. About 198 × 153 each. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

The Stations of the Cross reveals the artistic strategies that formed the core of Barnett Newman's departure from modernism. The beholder is confronted by none of the familiar figurative and abstract pictorial elements. The effect of the work is achieved solely by the open space, the powerful but simple composition and the large, extremely luminous expanses of colour. His palette consists only of black, raw canvas and white, because he wanted the canvas to become colour and to possess a sense of light (O'Neill 1990: 190).

The fourteen paintings are very intense and luminous, but also simple and sombre, because they visualize the stations of the cross. The French philosopher Christine Buci-Glucksmann rightly observes that the fourteen *Stations of the Cross* express very clearly and convincingly the experience and insight that the abstract expression of spirituality can awaken. She describes this effect as follows: 'Because', as she says 'here, it is from the empty, from the scanning rhythms of an active and dynamic emptiness that an idea of the "spiritual" is born which permeates the entire twentieth century.'⁵ However, as Menachem Wecker points out, there are examples in *The First Station of the Cross* of fragments of figuration (Figure 13.3). These are small, barely visible crucifix figures:

The portrait-oriented, black-and-white paintings and their bold stripes initially appear to be fully vertical in their thrusts, like crosses without horizontal shafts. But upon closer inspection, the vertical stripes, or 'zips,' as Newman called them, which he created with the help of masking tape, bleed colour from side to side, as a cross would if it were vibrating like a plucked guitar string. Each stripe, in a sense, consists of multiple miniature crosses, and subtle stains throughout the paintings could stand in as blood, sweat or tears. (Wecker 2012: 1)

Barnett Newman wrote that *The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachtani* were not just about the agony of Jesus, but also addressed the human condition. In his catalogue statement, he writes:

Lema Sabachtani – why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why? This is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk

Figure 13.3 *The First Station of the Cross*, Barnett Newman. Magna on canvas. 197.8 × 153.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer. This overwhelming question that does not complain, makes today's talk of alienation, as if alienation were a modern invention, an embarrassment. This question that has no answer has been with us so long – since Jesus – since Abraham – since Adam – the original question. (O'Neill 1990: 180)

It is not just the agony of Jesus that one is confronted with in *The Stations of the Cross*, but as Newman explained, 'each man's agony: the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, willed – world without end' (O'Neill 1990: 180).

In conversation with David Sylvester, Newman remarked, 'I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his separateness, of his own individuality, and at the same time, of his connection to others who are also separate' (O'Neill 1990: 257–8). Barnett Newman's intention is not just intended as a reminder of the biblical story of the *Fourteen Stations*, and he does not want to show it in static pictures. For him it is not enough for believers to follow a priest in a procession around the church stopping at each station. He is convinced that the *Stations* demand action from the participants: recitation of prayers, reflection and walking from one to the next. This active engagement is fundamental to Newman's understanding of his painted series. The viewer contemplates the subject and proceeds – along with other viewers – to experience each of the paintings singly and in sequence, considering their bodily relation to individual paintings but also turning their heads

to look at the preceding canvases and those that follow. The paintings demand the viewer's active physical, mental and emotional participation (Hellstein 2014).

The paintings have an open space, which create a strong interaction between them and the viewers. This relation is very important to Barnett Newman, because walking, looking, reflecting, meditating and turning around the paintings can establish physical and metaphysical self-awareness, which can connect the individual to other people and create an understanding and even an experience of shared suffering and ultimate mortality. Humans are all connected by this fate, both separately and together, but the prospect of Christ's love and forgiveness are ever present, but in a very discreet way.

J. F. Lyotard's concept of 'the sublime' and a radical new departure in modern Danish church art

In the 1980s, which were dominated by the rapid dissemination of knowledge, symbols and images in the information society, 'the sublime' reappears and creates perspectives and openings in a world so saturated with information and images that any form of immersion in it seems difficult. This time it was the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard who interpreted 'the sublime' as a fragmented surface that cannot be restored by ideological and philosophical attempts at reconciliation. He characterized 'the sublime' as follows: 'Kant's reflections on "the sublime" appear as a rupture, occurring like the crash of a meteorite onto the surface of the book. [...] This is the ontological earthquake that modernity is all about' (Juhl 1988: 133, 135). Lyotard's analysis of 'the sublime sentiment' or 'the sentiment of the sublime' incorporates Kant's interpretation, but has lost its metaphysical connotations. In Lyotard's own words: 'We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to "make visible" this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate' (Lyotard 1986: 77).

But pain is replaced by the pleasure of gaining an experience and discovering hitherto unknown, intense forces. For the artist, the experience of 'the sublime' generated by the encounter with 'the formless' or 'the raw natural mass' means liberation from age-old rules and pre-established models. In the attempt to grasp absolute greatness, the unlimited and the immeasurable – that which cannot be visualized – new principles for artistic creation are discovered. Experience gained from this encounter with 'the sublime' is concentrated in the work of art that creates new dense units of meanings in the infinite space. Lyotard is convinced that the essence of the impact of 'the sublime' in visual art 'consists in the experience that the absolute leaves its mark in the work, whatever form it may take' (Lyotard 1992: 21). Or as the Danish aesthetician Carsten Juhl remarks: 'By interfering with the raw mass of nature [...] form is created. Faced with the formlessness of the absolute great, the work starts to set boundaries' (Juhl 1986: 77).

'The sublime' in a work of art is not only its exposure of the unlimited, that which cannot be represented but only suggested, but also that the work of art is what Lyotard calls 'an event' and Heidegger called *ein Ereignis*, which makes it apparent that something new is coming into view (Lyotard 1984: 43). The artwork becomes the event, the mark in reality, which makes spectators realize that concepts, categories and words do not suffice to comprehend reality.

Lyotard lectured frequently at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, which is why he has influenced Danish artists like Hein Heinsen and his church art. Hein Heinsen has represented extreme positions in Danish art since the 1960s. He has always been engaged in visualizing or pointing to new images of the world and creating perspectives and unexpected correlations previously characterized by well-trodden paths. He has, for example, independently created parallels to the path first initiated by Newman and later taken up in minimal art and the new departures in the visual arts that followed in its wake. His church art in particular has also been inspired to a striking extent by 'the aesthetic of the sublime' (especially in Lyotard's version) and the view of a world in a constant process of transformation. His encounter with 'the aesthetic of the sublime' has confirmed his view that the sacred can never be contained within a figure or within general philosophical interpretations.

The depiction of figures has thus almost never appeared in any of his large church projects, such as those in St. James's Church in Roskilde (1974), Fyllingsdalen Church near Bergen, Norway (1980), St. John's Church in Vorup (together with Stig Brøgger) (1993) and Holte Church, Trørød (2012). But this does not mean that Heinsen rejects figures in church art. The absence is because the empty sepulchre, and the significance of the event associated with it, is for him the central feature of Christianity and thus incapable of being depicted adequately in a figurative language.

Various mostly non-figurative interpretations of Christ's death on the cross, the empty sepulchre and the resurrection are basic elements of Heinsen's large artistic elements in his church art. Most of them are altarpieces.

When creating the monumental altarpiece in Fyllingsdalen Church near Bergen in Norway (Figure 13.4), Heinsen incorporated the interior of the church in the surroundings. He demarcated the place that permitted the greatest possible degree of rigour in the categories of form that were to express what he regards as central to the Christian faith: the empty sepulchre and the resurrection. He exploits the intense play of light, which the architect Helge Hjertholm, created by means of the glass constructions that are a distinctive feature of the architecture of the church. Heinsen placed his decoration behind the altar. The large, sombre stone – 4.5 metres high – is fastened to the wall and cut into four parts. It is made of reddish-brown slate, speckled with mica. It appears mysterious and indeterminate and therefore refers not only to nature but also to an unknown location. This heavy, monumental stone, which weighs over a ton, forms a striking contrast to the slender cross, which divides it into four parts. The cross is composed of small pieces of glass in various thicknesses, which constantly catch the light. The rear wall of the church consists of ordinary industrial slabs, the linear pattern of their joints forming an interplay with the lines of the cross. The cross, whose lines are interrupted at several points, is therefore constantly related to our own reality. Seven shafts of chromium-plated steel that reflect the light intensify the luminous power of the work. Heinsen's decoration is a symbol without determined significances. In an interview about his project in the church, he stressed that this interior should be characterized by two fundamental concepts: distance and nearness. Theologically speaking, the words that are parallels to distance and nearness are sacredness (in the sense of *tremendum et fascinosum*) and love (in the sense of brotherhood) (Andersen 1989: 61–2). The altarpiece in Fyllingsdalen Church is very

Figure 13.4 Hein Heinsen. Altarpiece, Fyllingsdalen Church near Bergen, Norway, 1980. Photo: Hein Heinsen, courtesy of the photographer.

much determined by these two poles. The heavy, black stone is a reference to one of the most mysterious events: the empty sepulchre, which expresses an anticipation of what is to come – the resurrection. The idea of the empty tomb cannot be rendered visible by images from the ordinary world, because it expresses the incomprehensible, the absolutely great, which engenders an experience of ‘the sublime’, or of the limits to the human grasp of the world. The slender cross refers to Christ’s love. Its luminosity shatters the darkness and fills the interior with light. Christ’s love appears in this church project not only as the sacred, or ‘the sublime’, which lies beyond the human sphere of power, but also as that which is close at hand, which discloses a new dimension in everyday lives and emerges as an undeserved gift.

In Holte Church in Trørød (2102), Heinsen modelled the three sides of the altar table. They resemble a ploughed field. Only the plough furrows are visible. They are so vividly depicted that the viewer almost gets the feeling that the furrows are in the process of being turned. They seem to visualize an act of creation – something new in the process of coming into being. On the altar, there is a dynamic, abstract figure, which gives an impression of the coming of the Holy Spirit, its power and unpredictability (Figure 13.5). In a sense, the Creation is linked to unprecedented change created by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Biblical aniconism and its inclusion by Kant in the category of ‘the sublime’ has always been a prominent element in Heinsen’s interpretation of church art and his own artistic production. He sums up his concept of ‘the sublime’ as follows:

The law against images of the divine is a way of acknowledging that imitative images determine reality, confine the world and convert it into a permanent, manageable form. The image thus becomes a substitute for the world while at the same time eliminating the individual. [...] The best works of art in history always have fissures

Figure 13.5 Hein Heinsen, Altarpiece, Old Holte Church, Denmark, 2012. Photo by Poul Heinsen, courtesy of the photographer.

that provide space for the beholder. In other words, the law against idolatry is an attempt to maintain that the world is greater than our purposes with it: the world retracts from our grasp. But, one might ask, should we not as a consequence refrain from creating images? No, images are necessary, for without them we would cling to the old images that cover up reality. New images are necessary in order to break down set views; they point to the transgression of borderlines, the infinite, the divine. Images devoid of 'the sublime' are petty, provincial and conservative. (Andersen 1989: 61–2)

A number of prominent artists working with Christian themes dating as far back as the Byzantine era have considered the limitations of the possibilities of expression in the language of figurative art. Artists are often forced to acknowledge that non-figurative tools can convey aspects of Christianity, which the vocabulary of figurative form can only achieve in a very limited way. This is first and foremost the case with the holy, the paradox of faith, the Trinity, the resurrection of the flesh and the coming of the Holy Ghost. This insight is often inspired by artists' particular understanding of biblical aniconism, which later became one of the fundamental elements in the concept of 'the sublime passion'. It was precisely this encounter that artists – and artists working with Christian themes in particular – had with 'the sublime', which became a fruitful source of inspiration and a liberating force in periods where unilateral cults of reason, antiquated rules and entrenched models dominated the art world. This was a frequent occurrence in the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment and the century that followed. But in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the experience of 'the sublime' has also meant a liberation from rules, models and fashionable trends. In attempting

to present the unrepresentable – the divine or the infinitely great – artists gained new artistic experience and acquired a new space for their creative activity. For them, the experience of ‘the sublime’ was also the discovery of a fracture that can never be healed, revealing that it – whether understood as the divine or as an unrepresentable ‘beyond’ in excess of understanding and depiction – is forever beyond the human sphere of power.