

## Surfaces



### TROPING THE SITE PHANTASMIC

Peter de Bolla *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989)

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**BOOK REVIEW OF PETER DE BOLLA:  
*THE DISCOURSE OF THE SUBLIME***

**TROPING THE SITE PHANTASMIC**

Craig Moyes

**Peter de Bolla *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989).**

If one were to sum up the past twenty years of fashionable academic discourse on literature in a single word, that word would have to be "theory". The polemics that theory has aroused, in English North-America in any case, need not be rehearsed here. But whatever its present epistemological status, the value-laden charge that theory carries, for its defenders as well as its critics, has much to do with its perception as "foreign", both to the academic practice and literary sensibility of university "English". Theory is thus at the same time not "English" (in the sense that it is perceived as an unwanted intrusion from another discipline), and not English (in the sense that it is, more often than not, seen as being suspiciously French). It is clear by now, as we approach the third decade of resistance and defence, that many of the skirmishes around this issue are a result of a certain xenophobia and xenophilia played out around the trope of the conservative and the radical. But what if theory had been a cornerstone of British aesthetics since the mid-1700s? What if the practice of theoretical discourse itself were more than just the condition of possibility for a refined conceptualization of the real, but permitted and defined our own subjectivity, the self-authenticating subject of modernity? Indeed, what if, after all these years, we find out that the Roland Barthes who vexed and seduced us in the seventies is really our old friend from the fifties -the seventeen-fifties-, Edmund Burke? and that what many of us took to be a French revolution is in fact a sublimity we have long been contemplating.

A re-evaluation of our own theoretical preoccupations is but one of the possibilities de Bolla's analysis permits. *The Discourse of the Sublime* might

have been called many things; its restrained title scarcely does justice to the complexity of its manifold argument. It is perhaps fitting, then, that de Bolla prefaces his study by a fantastic tale which could easily be termed a kind of overture (in the musical sense of an introductory movement made up of themes later treated at length), but which he himself calls an "advertisement". Aptly it turns out, because, being in this case less a *publicité* than an *avertissement*, "The Phantasmic Body" is indeed an early warning, a pre-monition of sorts: a feverish dream whispered on a sick-bed, a ghoulish tale of poetic exhumation (literally: Milton's disenterment) and sexual commerce, an account of phantasmic apparition and, yes, a testament to historical scholarship. For, as the note appended to the end of this odd beginning tells us, this is a dream woven entirely from eighteenth century source material, all of which is meticulously documented. And whatever else it is, *The Discourse of the Sublime* is a work of history writing. The warning? Phantasmic (as a true premonition ought to be), the body invoked in this overture guards first against the temptation of narrative closure, what de Bolla takes to be the real bogey of historiography. In the perspicuous introduction that follows, he writes:

To end up arguing that the discourse of the sublime pervades every discourse in the years following the war, that it is the mark of the subject for the second half of the century, would have been, in very obvious ways, deeply satisfying; unfortunately it would also have been unresponsive to what I take as the full force of a sceptical historical method since it would have reimposed the enabling criteria on the material brought to light by the analysis. In contrast, I have attempted to demonstrate that with a more flexible procedure for analyzing historically determined discourse it becomes possible to note connections and overlaps at the constitutive level of discourse. In this way the discourse of the sublime can be seen as one of the discourses present to the network which defines and enables the subject at a particular moment during the eighteenth century, and when seen from a particular perspective. It is, of course, as important that this perspective tells us as much about our present needs and desires in relation to the analytical procedures and protocols of historical enquiry as about the emergence of subjectivity during the eighteenth century in England. (p. 17)

The provocative thesis of de Bolla's book is more than another history of the sublime. In fact, both the "idea" of history and the "idea" of the sublime are resisted as strongly as possible, since both of these formulations lead to an irremediable dualism of mind and world which, in its reification of one or the other, tends to forget that both only exist for the historian as discourse. Rather than concerning himself with either the psychological or physiological effects of sublime sensation, de Bolla turns his attention to the discursive practice of describing that sublime. This discursive practice, whatever it might have been called by the aestheticians of the eighteenth century, is properly theoretical. De Bolla insists on the adverb "properly"; for, cognate with "property", it cuts to the quick of the practice of theory itself. Yet the relations of ownership implied by this term are not as we might expect: it is less the theory that belongs to the subject and implies his

mastery over the world, than the theory, as discursive practice, which controls and legislates the subject.

Now the subject, as de Bolla repeatedly makes clear, is not to be confused with historical persons; it is first of all an opening or space within discourse which allows a "subject position"; it is in fact, to take an obsolete sense of the word, an "overture". But, to take up the body metaphor that de Bolla is so fond of, this same pore effectively "secretes" the subject. De Bolla takes it as axiomatic that the subject is specific to a certain age and defined by a specific set of discourses. These are, for the purposes of his treatment, the eighteenth century in Britain and two of the discourses (but not only these two) unique to that age, the aesthetic discussion of the sublime and the political rhetoric surrounding the national debt. His principal argument is that a single subject, the self-authenticating subject of modernism, is the result of a discursive network during a period in which these two discourses, ostensibly unrelated, betray a similar logic:

To put this as baldly as possible, both the discourse on the sublime and the discourse on the national debt during the Seven Years War ran into a problem of immense scale and importance which becomes legible when we see these discussions as legislative discourses. This problem was conceived as the following: how can one control a discourse which sets out to examine the ways and means for controlling an excess, the sublime experience in the case of the one and the national debt in the case of the other, when that excess is visualized by the discourse of analysis as its own product? (p. 14)

What makes this audacious thesis at all possible is de Bolla's rigorous methodology. Let me first say what he avoids by this. He resists on one hand the traditional fall into the historical "real", the authenticating reach to an unrecoverable origin that is the epistemological foundation of all too many treatments in history, be they of "ideas" or "events" -- ultimately a fall into narrativity and its corollary of causal explanation; and on the other, he stops short of -- in fact, intentionally defuses -- a possible description based on a notion of discursive rupture à la Foucault. What he does do is impossible to do justice to in a review article, but he takes great pains to make his own theoretical position very clear both in his introduction and indeed throughout his analysis. Briefly, though, we may state that his object is less the sublime or the eighteenth century than -- to borrow a corporeal trope that the author would approve -- its discursive incarnation. The "real" of history here being investigated is first and foremost the real of historical documents.

The initial "hard" analytical distinction he makes in order to drive the subsequent treatment is between what he calls a discourse "on" something, or "discrete discourse", and a discourse "of" something, or "discursive

network". The first is easy enough: it is a discourse which, in taking its object, "signals its detachment from neighbouring discourses":

[...] a discourse on something is to be taken as a discrete discourse, a discourse which is to be read in a highly specific way, within a very well defined context. A discourse on politics, for example, can be located in the eighteenth century by noting those 'texts' which require now, as much as they required then, to be placed within the context of the political (p. 9).

The second is to be distinguished from the first in that it does not say "read me like this". It is made up of several (but by no means all) discrete discourses at a certain point in time:

To return to the above example, the discourse of politics for the eighteenth century [...] is made up of a number of discrete discourses, from ethics and theology to duelling, and includes the discourse on politics: it does not, however, demand that it be read as a discrete discourse on something (p. 10).

The first part of the book applies this conceptual tool to the two discrete discourses of sublime and debt. Once this hard distinction is put into practice, however, he notes that its rigidity is only heuristic: discrete discourses in fact "leak". Indeed, it is the nature of the discourse on the sublime that other discourses, for example ethics or religion, must be imported into the theory in order to, as de Bolla puts it, "bring to law" its unique power. The power of the sublime lies in its step beyond agency, the Longinian "thunderbolt", which not only takes the auditors beyond themselves, but through which the orator himself loses self-control.

...'transport' as a trope not only stands for the heightened sensation of the sublime, it also produces sublimity. It could be argued that eighteenth century aesthetics takes on precisely the task of limiting the power of this trope, and that its major achievement is to construct an adequate legislature able to police the transport of the sublime experience (p. 37).

Thus, as it falls to theory to control the excess of the sublime experience even as it describes it, a new subject position, one which is both this surplus and its management, is also thereby produced. The result is that the discourse on the sublime, which began as a discrete discourse within the eighteenth century discursive network "aesthetics", gradually underwent a transformation such that it became a discourse of the sublime, that is, it became itself a discursive network subsuming other discrete discourses,

including one at first glance far removed from the discourse of aesthetics, that of the national debt. One of the factors that made this possible, de Bolla argues, was the unique subject position implied by the theorization of the sublime experience. This permits his strongest claim that, as a rationalization of an uncontrollable surplus overtaking the body -- whether this body be physical or politic -- , the discourse of the sublime becomes itself the authorization of the modern subject, one moreover still largely with us: the subject as individual incarnation of the welling up of discursive excess.

Again, it is impossible to here do justice to the complexity of his argument, which, restricted to the first half of his book, is on its own without a doubt the most interesting treatment of the sublime (specifically -- and indeed, this is a specification all too often neglected -- the post-Augustan pre-Romantic sublime) [1] to have been written so far. But it is de Bolla's prime intention, as I have tried to point out, to investigate the discursive formation of the modern subject within the theoretical project of the eighteenth century. The second part of *The Discourse of the Sublime* thus becomes the discursive testing ground for the argument of the first half. It becomes the burden of Part II to traverse three other discrete discourses -- oratory, perspective theory and reading theory -- with the same conceptual tools and, if you will, the findings arrived at in Part I.

If the subject is a leakage of theoretical discourse, the surplus which must also be "brought to law" by that same discourse, what then is its relation to practice, specifically the practice that these theories ostensibly set out to describe? What happens when an individual subject, in flesh and blood, is called upon to occupy the "subject position" opened up by discourse? This is what Part II attempts to answer, though without ever losing sight of the goals of the "sceptical historical method" laid out in the introduction. Even here, de Bolla continually resists the historiographic fall into an authenticating "real". The answer therefore remains couched in discursive terms. "Theory," he states,

does not set out to describe or codify a practice, it is not an empirically based operation, although it may present itself as such, but a generative system which requires a practice, produced by the system, in order to function (p. 21).

The result of this theorizing of physical practice -- one moreover necessary, once we reflect upon it -- is that the body becomes "troped" within theoretical discourse. Each theory must in some way render the body congruent with the excess that is the subject, even if the corporeal involvement seems at first glance to be minor, as in some theories of the sublime or of reading. The example of public speaking that de Bolla adduces

is stronger -- the overriding task of the eighteenth century orator being the bringing of two languages, that of the spoken text and that of the corporeal gesture, into persuasive harmony -- but this troping, or textualizing of the body is a constant in all of the theoretical discourses that he analyses.

De Bolla limits his analysis to eighteenth century Britain. Curiously enough, however, the burden of a "continental theory", published in French but one year after Burke's, is remarkably similar: Rousseau's *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles*. Here too, excessive inequality -- whether political, economic, or metaphysical -- is a thing to be avoided at all costs, and in his letter Rousseau returns to this theme again and again. For a citizen of a Republic like Geneva<sup>[2]</sup>, the theatre can only be the site of a disequilibrium, for it involves the dangerous bringing together of extremes within a state founded upon moderation: from the excesses of wealth and poverty literally rubbing elbows in the auditorium (169-73), to the irreality of the drama and the corporeality of the actors mingling upon the stage (121-23). Indeed, Rousseau's fear that the text will somehow take over the subject leads him to insist upon the continual surveillance of the body, especially of those bodies most prone to excess, viz, the young:

qu'on me dise où de jeunes personnes à marier auront l'occasion de prendre du goût l'une pour l'autre, et de se voir avec plus de décence et de circonspection que dans une assemblée où les yeux du public, incessamment ouverts sur elles, les forcent à la réserve, à la modestie, à s'observer avec le plus grand soin. (189-90)

It is important to note that through incessant surveillance these bodies will be forced into *observing themselves*, keeping, hopefully, the subject that elsewhere risks theatrical excess in check. This metaphorical operation is then troped further, as the result of this properly *theoretical* (the Greek *theoria*, remember, is "a looking at, viewing, contemplation" -- O.E.D.) control of the individual body is a body politic in accord with the spirit of its constitution:

Les liaisons devenant plus faciles, les mariages seroient plus fréquens; ces mariages, moins circonscrits par les mêmes conditions, préviendroient les partis, tempéreroient l'excessive inégalité, maintiendroient mieux le corps du peuple dans l'esprit de sa constitution. (194)

The double sense of "constitution" is crucial here, being at once the health of the metaphorical body and the (pre)textual condition of its existence.

The sheer volume of Rousseau's response to d'Alembert's innocuous suggestion that a theatre be established in Geneva indicates the seriousness with which a theory of the political and metaphysical subject had to be taken. The potentially uncontrollable surplus that the theatre implied to Rousseau simply had to be legislated, in this case radically, by both theoretical troping and political exclusion. Now Diderot, as we know, delighted in this very same excess that caused Rousseau so much consternation. It is enough to read *Les bijoux indiscrets* to see thematized the unruly subject literally pouring out of secret orifices, and the vain efforts of scholars and clerics to muzzle it. Of course, despite its philosophical and political preoccupations, *Les bijoux indiscrets* remains a work of fiction, a novel. We know, too, that such delights are permitted in literature, for we know that they will eventually be "brought to law" within the appropriate institutional or theoretical frameworks.

Should it then surprise us that, in our own epoch, we find this same pleasure in the production of the "unruly subject"[\[3\]](#) being taken in the guise of theory itself? Roland Barthes, in *Le plaisir du texte*, proposes a distinction between plaisir and jouissance, a distinction, moreover, startlingly close the beautiful and the sublime of Burke. But where Burke invokes an adjacent discourse, that of theology, to subdue the excess that his theory has produced, Barthes, who understands that the subject fits in somewhere between text and body, revels in its textual secretion (or, in his case, its literal ejaculation)[\[4\]](#). On the possibility of establishing a theory of the materialist subject, he writes:

Alors peut-être revient le sujet, non comme illusion, mais comme *fiction*. Un certain plaisir est tiré d'une façon de s'imaginer comme individu, d'inventer une dernière fiction, des plus rares : le fictif de l'identité. Cette fiction n'est plus l'illusion d'une unité; elle est au contraire le théâtre de société où nous faisons comparaître notre pluriel : notre plaisir est *individuel* - mais non personnel.

Chaque fois que j'essaie d'«analyser» un texte qui m'a donné du plaisir, ce n'est pas ma «subjectivité» que je retrouve, c'est mon «individu», la donnée qui fait mon corps séparé des autres corps et lui approprie sa souffrance ou son plaisir: c'est mon corps de jouissance que je retrouve.[\[5\]](#)

Caught between text and body, the subject is literally, as Barthes so aptly puts it, *invité à comparaître*. Compare: to appear with (etymologically), to appear before (judicially): amongst ourselves and before texts, we, like our forebears, appear and disappear as phantasmic bodies within the collective subjectivity of the age. One of the great merits of *The Discourse of the Sublime* is to have historicized this phenomenon, to have shown us that far from being simply foreign and faddish, the theoretical imbrications of the



subject have been with us for a while, and are likely to remain with us for some while still. If to the Anglo-Saxon academic reader the excessive "personality" of the Barthesian analysis is often a stumbling block to its appreciation, to him de Bolla gives an invaluable key. Indeed, Barthes is perhaps one of the most perfect modern examples of the sublime (or *jouissif*) discursive excess of theory that de Bolla describes: a subject who theorizes himself as such. Barthes is thus, in a surprising but very real sense, a descendant of (and a complement to) Edmund Burke, whose theoretical legacy we are now in a better position to understand.

In short, *The Discourse of the Sublime* should be of interest both to historians and to theoreticians of literature. It is at once rich and timely, but more than this: Peter de Bolla's book is /pp. 13-14/ one of the most impressive works of historical, theoretical and aesthetic criticism to have been published in English in a long time.

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[1]The final section/chapter discusses the difference between the mid-eighteenth century sublime and the Romantic and Kantian sublimes. There, De Bolla takes those analysts to task who read the sublime purely as an aesthetic category; lacking the same historiographic method, they still view it largely through a Kantian optic.

[2]This is precisely how Rousseau presents himself, in contrast to the cosmopolitan royal subject, d'Alembert. See the note by L. Brunel: *Lettre à M. D'Alembert sur les spectacles*, éd L. Brunel (9e éd., Paris: Hachette, 1922), p. 2, n.1.

[3]The phrase is de Bolla's.

[4]In fact, this same sexual charge is everywhere apparent in Burke, too: e.g., the sublime causes "swelling", whereas the beautiful causes "love"; *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 50, 91. De Bolla notes this as well, which allows him to argue for a gendered subject position; op. cit., pp. 56-58, 71-72.

[5]*Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 98.