

Representing the sublime: interactions between spatial representations in new media and idyllic and mystic traditions in painting.

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Volume I: Text

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Table of contents	Page
Volume I: text	
List of illustrations	v
Films and digital material	vii
 Chapter 1: Pureland?	 1
1.1 Expanse and the sublime	8
1.2 The glow of the screen	9
1.3 Flatness and immersion within Japanese landscapes	10
1.4 The floating world	12
1.5 <i>Ukiyo-e</i> and <i>manga</i> : cuteness and violence	13
1.6 <i>Manga</i> and children: immersion and the sublime	15
1.7 Popular culture, the idyllic and mystic	16
1.8 Hybridity	20
 Chapter 2: Manifestations of the sublime	 23
2.1 The digital sublime and new media art	22
2.2 The mystic landscape and the Kantian sublime	25
2.3 The technological sublime and Abstract Expressionism	36
2.4 Lyotard and the sublime	40
 Chapter 3: The digital sublime: screen and frame	 43
3.1 New media and the screen	44
3.2 Created environments and immersivity	46
3.3 Japanese painting and non-Western perspectival mechanisms	53
 Chapter 4: <i>Anime</i> and the sublime dialectic	 57
4.1 Edo, <i>ukiyo-e</i> , “superflat” and new media	57
4.2 Cuteness and violence	59
4.3 Child-like immersion	62
 Chapter 5: The idyllic in popular culture	 64
5.1 <i>Pureland</i> as Western <i>locus amoenus</i> and popular idyll	65
5.2 The myth of the “return to Nature”.	69
5.2.1. Arcadia and the Golden Age	69
5.2.2. Utopia	70
5.3 Idyllic and mystic	70

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Hybridity	73
Abstract and summary	73
Volume II: visual material	

List of Illustrations:

1. Mariko Mori (1967-), *Pureland* (1997-98). Glass with photo interlayer, edition of three. Five panels of 305 x 610 x 2.2 cm each. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Weintraub 2003: 315).
2. Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), *Fuji in clear weather* (1823-29). Woodblock print, 26.1 x 37.6 cm. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum. (Hillier 1954: 35).
3. Stills from *Spirited Away*. 2001. Hayao Miyazaki. Studio Ghibli.
4. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), *Monk by the sea* (1809-10). Oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm. Berlin: National Gallerie (Koerner 1990: 168).
5. Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *Blue, green and brown* (1951). Oil on canvas. Upperville: collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon (van de Vall 1995: 70).
6. Yves Klein (1928-1962). *IKB 181* (1956). Dry pigment in synthetic resin stuck to linen cloth, 76 x 54 cm. Madrid: Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
<http://www.the-exit.net/plaza/yves-klein.de>
7. James Turrell (1943-). *Spread* (2003). Fluorescent and neon light installation. Henry Art Gallery, Seattle. Photo by Dean Welshman.
<http://www.preview-art.com/features/turrell.html>
8. Still from *Nirvana*, 3 D video installation by Mariko Mori
9. Still from *Nirvana*, 3 D video installation by Mariko Mori
10. Still from *Nirvana*, 3 D video installation by Mariko Mori

11. Yves Klein (1928-1962). Installation shot of retrospective exhibition entitled *Yves Klein* at Shcirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt 17 September 2004 – 9 January 2005.
<http://www.the-exit.net/plaza/yves-klein.de>

12. James Turrell (1943-), *Unseen Blue* (2002). Corrugated steel-clad structure with aperture in the ceiling and mahogany seating for thirty people, 20 x 23 x 23 m. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, parking lot: The Mattress Factory.
<http://www.mattress.org/catalogue/02/turrell/skyspace.html>

13. Landi Raubenheimer (1981-). *The floating world* (2005). Oil on canvas, approx 2 x 2m. Private collection (Courtesy of artist).

14. Tabaimo (1975-), *Japanese Bathhouse-Gents* (2003). Lithograph on Japanese paper, edition of 5, 42 x 60 cm each. Tokyo: Hiromi Yoshii.
<http://www.re-title.com/artists/tabaimo-.asp>

15. Still of tree spirits from *Princess Mononoke*.

16. Henri Matisse (1869-1954) *The Music* (1910). Oil on canvas, 260 x 389 cm. St. Petersburg, Russia: State Hermitage Museum (Gowing 1979: 104).

17. Claude Lorrain (1604-1682), *Landscape with rural dance* (1640-41). Oil on canvas, 114 x 147 cm. Bedland Estate: Woburn Abbey. (Andrews 1999: 98, 50)

18. Demon sequence. Video clip from *Princess Mononoke*. Hayao Miyazaki. 1997.

19. Tree spirit sequence. Video clip from *Princess Mononoke*. Hayao Miyazaki. 1997.

Films and digital material

Mamoru Oshii. *Ghost in the shell*. 1995. Masamune Shirow/Kodansha/Bandai visual/Manga Entertainment. Production I.G.

Mamoru Oshii. *Ghost in the shell II Innocence*. 2003. Production I.G.

Sakaguchi, H & Sakakibara, M. *The Animatrix*. 2001. Warner Bros.

Hayao Miyazaki. *Princess Mononoke*. 1997. Studio Ghibli.

Hayao Miyazaki. *Spirited Away*. 2001. Studio Ghibli.

Chapter 1: Pureland ?

This investigation stands in an interactive relationship with simultaneously executed studio research in painting. The foremost image investigated in this study, and which brings new problems to the fore, is a cibachrome print entitled *Pureland*¹ (fig. 1) by Japanese artist Mariko Mori. The title of the image will be investigated as a potentially ironic reference to Cheetham's *The rhetoric of purity: essentialist theory and the advent of abstract painting* (1991), and Nägele's *The pure gaze* (2001). The print is a still image from one of her 3D installations titled *Nirvana*.² *Pureland* is an image not only found as a cibachrome print in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but also as a digital image, potentially accessible on any website or included in any digital database (Manovich 2001: 29-41). Throughout the text I shall refer to *Pureland* not as a pure image but as one appearing in different media, since the varied visual manifestations and reproductions of the image contribute to diverse aspects of the argument. The image is found in calendars and books, is exhibited as a large print and certain of Mori's prints are even exhibited on lightboxes, and are thus lit from behind (Cotton 2004: 67). This lends the prints a glowing computer or television screen quality, and suggests the notion of an advertising billboard, often printed on lightboxes.

I suspect that *Pureland* is a hybrid image, not only digitally composited from existing visual material, but also comprised of traces of disparate visual traditions and conventions. Its appearance seems extremely agreeable in the smooth surfaces, pink glow, the passive figures floating above the landscape and the overall pacific impression. Such "eye-candy" alludes to the affirmative character of mass media images that describe beautiful natural scenery, such as may be found in the Japanese animated genres of *anime* (Japanese animated films and

¹ The image is a still from the 3D installation *Nirvana*, to which I will also refer in order to add dimension to the investigation of *Pureland*.

² *Nirvana* is a video installation viewed by means of 3D glasses, thus rendering parts of the image three-dimensional. The self-portrait figure of Mori appears to intrude the space of the observer as she hovers across the landscape.

series) and *manga* (Japanese graphic novels). Such sentimental images also appear in Western popular media such as Hollywood films, television series, magazines and so forth. The pleasant “topos” that Mori refers to seems reminiscent of some landscape traditions that relate to idyllic yearning or nostalgia. Some of the questions that are investigated are: could the popular notion of “pleasant place” be brought to bear on the exotic or idyll of Gauguin or Matisse? Or do the idyllic or pleasant tendencies in contemporary mass media have some of their roots in the tourist tradition of the eighteenth century British picturesque tradition? Is the pastoral tradition in its established conventions, as are manifested in the paintings of Claude Lorrain, for instance pertinent to the idyllic tendencies in mass media? How does the notion of utopia fit into the understanding of *Pureland*? Does nostalgia for an “original” Japan manifest in references to *ukiyo-e*³ which may be found in *anime* and *manga*?

The affirmative tendency in many “pleasant” representations of natural scenery in the mass media which I suspect is re-presented in *Pureland*, does not fully exhaust this image. What seems problematic in my view is that one feels as if something is omitted from the image on account of its pleasing character. It seems that there must be something more to the image that would make it believable or “real”. It is as if the image resists the spectator’s gaze. It does not present any other “reality” than that which is immediately visible; the perfect delightful image. This rigidity seems to be an important aspect of the image that may indicate that what is *not depicted* may also be present. To my mind the digital sublime lurks beneath the smooth appearance of the image, only to manifest in brief moments of epiphany. Revelation may be triggered by depictions of terror as in some *anime* films, or in this case by the insistent denial

³ *Ukiyo-e* were popular wood block prints manufactured in nineteenth-century Japan. The prints display very specific conventions such as dark outlining which may be related to contemporary Japanese genres of animation (*anime*) and comic books or graphic novels (*manga*). The word *ukiyo* is a Buddhist term meaning *the floating world* that connoted the world of earthly pleasure and decadence, and in the nineteenth century came to be associated with the nightlife and entertainment industry in cities such as Edo and Nagasaki (Screech 2002: 22). The relationship between *ukiyo-e* and *anime* is discussed in *The Japanese experience inevitable* in various essays edited by Margrit Brehm (2002).

of anything but the pretty depiction in *Pureland*. This sublimity may be understood in the context of the mystic landscape tradition and especially the work of artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner. The basis of the mystic tradition is a negative stance grounded in the notion of *kenosis*, which is an emptying out resulting in epiphany or transcendence. The mystic tradition as it develops into the Abstract Expressionist movement in the work of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newmann and even the avant-garde art of Yves Klein is fundamentally opposed to the affirmative tendency in popular culture that may be the result or culmination of the development (decline?) of idyllic conventions into popular culture.

It is the aim of this investigation to uncover a sublime presence beneath the pleasant surface of *Pureland*. The sublime that I believe lurks here is the “digital sublime” which is derived from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s (1984) understanding of the concept. The digital sublime may manifest in cyberspace, virtual reality and other digital media that evoke virtual space, through its seeming vastness and threatening character. Understanding the operations of viewing and representation implied by the computer and television screen is thus important in grasping the dynamic of the digital sublime. Are the representations of space on the screen seems different from perspectival representation of space and landscape in the fixed images of Western painting traditions (Kubovy 1986: 52-65)? Perspectival robustness creates the effect of the image addressing and “following the observer”, on the screen however, layering (overlay) and geometric principles are combined, urging the observer to penetrate and explore the layers, virtually or imaginatively entering the layered virtual environment. The notion of virtual depth as non-illusory depth may be comparable to representational techniques, Japanese viewing traditions and the diverse concepts of *śūnyatā*⁴

⁴ *Śūnyatā* is a term that McEvilley (1996: 45-90) discusses as it originates from the Buddhist idea of emptiness, the Japanese painter Kubota employed the concept in his art and painterly treatment of space. It also relates to the Buddhist idea of empty space making room for events to take place. As such it also constitutes the empty space through which all life is extinguished. Bryson (1988: 87-104) relates the term to the Western concept of the “gaze” in the writings of Lacan and Sartre, in the context of the Japanese thought of Nishida and Nishitani.

(Bryson 1988: 87-108) and “superflat”⁵ (Brehm 2002: 34-40). As such the application of overlay and *śūnyatā* to contemporary painting should be investigated.

The digital sublime is latent in the mass entertainment industry which is largely constituted by digital information and mass media. The fact that digital technology appears so threatening in its omnipresence, as dystopian writers such as Jean Baudrillard (1993) and Neil Postman (1993) seem to argue, along with the fact that it is alternatively often seen as a salvation by utopian writers such as Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998; 1999), facilitates the sublime experience of digital images. Perhaps the characteristics of a sublime experience, as defined by Kant (1790-99: 5-42), can also to an extent be discerned in such unlikely imagery and narratives as Western popular films or images as well as Japanese *anime* and *manga*. I suspect that the concepts of “suddenness” and “presence”, respectively defined by Karl Heinz Bohrer (1994: 198-226) and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004: 91-132) may clarify the relationship between seemingly meaningless mass culture and the highly articulated aesthetic ontology of the sublime experience. The affinity that popular media and particularly Japanese pop culture have for the depiction of extreme images or scenarios can perhaps also be interpreted as a revelation of this digital sublime. The relationship between extremity and abjection, and abjection and the unrepresentable (or sublime), has to be investigated in this context.

The sections below roughly describe the structure of the study and can be regarded as a condensed presentation of the problems that are investigated. Different aspects of *Pureland* are explored, discerning the mystic and idyllic landscape traditions. Their coexistence along with their irreconcilable

⁵ Japanese artist Takashi Murakami uses this term to describe his art, and a broader Japanese worldview. It is also discussed by Marc Steinberg (2004: 449-471) who places emphasis on the link that is construed in popular culture between the Edo period and Japanese uniqueness and individuality. Magrit Brehm (2002) discusses *anime* as popular and artistic phenomenon in the work of Takashi Murakami among others.

characteristics is discussed as being implicit within the image. The notion of the digital sublime is also investigated from different points of view, regarding the aspects of landscape traditions, screen media, *anime* and *ukiyo-e*.

1.1 Sublime expanse

The prominent horizon in *Pureland* is immediately noticeable as one of the main features of the image. The horizon is the most basic feature of a landscape depiction and immediately lends the image its appearance of “land” and its meanings of “world”. Although the horizon creates an appearance of space, it negates the semblance of *illusionary* depth, as the middle-ground of the image becomes flat, thus accentuating the contrast between foreground and horizon. The “flatness” and featurelessness of the image relates to disparate traditions and modes of representation in art and visual culture. An unlikely comparison with Caspar David Friedrich’s *Monk by the sea* (fig. 4) may reveal that the image is not merely anodyne, but that its pleasant surface appearance belies an underlying negativity.

Featurelessness is more prominent in Friedrich’s painting than in *Pureland*, simply depicting a miniscule monk-like figure on the edge of the shore. The figure is overwhelmed by the expanse of a looming dark sky. The painting as a whole can be understood in terms of Kant’s aesthetic theory of the sublime, despite the fact that according to his theory, extreme forces of nature (and not artworks) may instigate a sublime experience. For him, the sublime confrontation with vast or powerfully threatening nature leads the human subject to overcome terror in the face of it, and to eventually experience a sense of elation at human intellectual superiority, despite sensory inferiority. He thus saw it as a dialectic of terror and attraction (Kant 1790-99: 5-42).

The threat of being engulfed by the sheer magnitude of the expanse in *Monk by the sea* is clearly visible, since the monk is dwarfed by it. In *Pureland* there is no

apparent threat, but the sweetness of its emptiness appears too good to be true. One gets the feeling that the artist is deliberately concealing or withholding an implicit negative element from the image. In the event of the sublime there is always a dialectical structure; terror implodes into a sense of human dignity. The desolation in the infinite space of *Monk by the sea* seems comparable to the desolation concealed just below the surface of *Pureland*. In chapter two the digital sublime, as manifest in *Pureland*, is investigated by extracting and selecting historical manifestations of the sublime.

1.2 The glow of the screen

The smoothness of the surface of what appears to be water in *Pureland* is extremely artificial. There is very little differentiation between the sky and the water. The sky and water display a flatness which may be related to the computer screen. The glow of the computer screen is relatively flat and yet one peers into it as it is transparent. Certain functions are performed on toolbars and other software interfaces which appear to be on the surface of the screen, but there is also a virtual depth. One is aware of information beyond the screen, the most obvious derivative being the internet and cyberspace. *Pureland* glows from within, with no light sources depicted. This glow may be compared with that of the computer or television screen and the *Pureland* image is also sometimes displayed as a print lit from behind (Cotton 2004: 67). The glow of the screen flickers, reminding one of the incessant electronic activity behind the tranquil and static appearance of the screen.⁶ The underlying activity is evidence of a larger information network coursing throughout the world and regulating much of daily human life.⁷

⁶ Barbara Maria Stafford (1996: 1-92) relates this glow of the screen to the eighteenth century fascination with phantasmagoria; magic lanterns and curiosities, and says that the internet is characterised by a quasi-mythical interactivity.

⁷ Lev Manovich (2001: 94-114) discusses the screen as medium and its relevance or ontology from the Renaissance, tracing its development through to virtual reality.

The sky in *Pureland* appears to be opaque, revealing nothing, but one can intuit the activity and energy beyond the placid surface. There is no focal point in the sky and distance is rather flimsily hinted at, through layers extending from the initial layer or “background” of the photograph taken at the Dead Sea that Mori uses in *Pureland* (Weintraub 2003: 316). The interplay between surface and depth is related to the concept of immersion (Grau 2003) which in turn reveals the unyielding character of the image. It draws the viewer in and conceals what the viewer wants it to reveal, a threatening presence just beneath the surface. While hinting at the sublime in its impenetrability and featurelessness, the image is so rigid (bland) in its prettiness that it grants the viewer no relief. The flawlessness of the depicted state of elation is so implausible that the viewer expects it to reveal something more nasty, yet the image does not respond to the need. It becomes almost an unresolved experience of the sublime in that the viewer walks away feeling unsure of what exactly is being depicted and cannot be depicted. *Pureland* does not instigate the Kantian sublime experience, and it follows that the sublime in post-modernity can no longer support the Kantian triumph in the freedom of the rational human personality, for such an idealised human identity is no longer present (Kant 1790-99). These questions will be investigated in chapter three.

1.3 Flatness and immersion in Japanese landscapes

The spread-out perspective of the image with elements on the very edge of the picture, along with its flatness, is reminiscent of a Japanese convention of depicting space and landscape. It relates to the Japanese concept of *śūnyatā*, which can be translated as emptiness or nihility (Bryson 1998: 88). This Japanese approach to seeing does not rely on the object/subject distinction employed by the Western gaze (of Lacan and Sartre). Whereas the latter occurs between subject and a necessary object, this Japanese approach to viewing regards the object as the entire environment outside the subject. The logocentric gaze in Western art implies specific conventions in representation, and when

applied to the landscape it engenders roles of domination and submission. The subject imposes conventions of seeing upon the object, the landscape (Gowing 1998: 195-201). With regard to landscape representation resulting from the gaze of *śūnyatā* I do not mean to say that it implies a vision free of imposed structure upon the landscape. Rather, this Japanese principle does not function according to roles of domination, and results in different representations of landscape space and depth from the illusory depth of a Western landscape painting. Bryson discusses *śūnyatā* as Japanese philosopher Nishitani interprets it with reference to vision, removing the object of vision from the framing mechanism that always produces an object for a subject and vice versa. The object is instead regarded in the context of “the expanded field of blankness” or *śūnyatā* (Bryson 1988: 100).

Such a manner of seeing (the gaze of *śūnyatā*) implies different representational results from the Western gaze, and Bryson (1988: 101) relates it to the non-representational or anti-representational, as manifest in the Japanese technique of “flung ink”. What is important is the emphasis on the views of the object that the subject cannot see exclusively from one position. These views cannot be simultaneously represented or experienced by the human subject and in this sense becomes an unrepresentable comparable to the unrepresentable sublime in Abstract Expressionist art. What this implies is that the subject is subordinate to the environment or the emptiness of *śūnyatā*, the human sensory organs fail to grasp the infinite views of the object’s true appearance. The viewer is thus surrounded by emptiness, or in employing or seeing a representation that refers to the gaze of *śūnyatā*, is immersed in a space that he or she is unable to grasp sensorily. It may be compared to the immersion one experiences in virtual reality, but perhaps virtual reality does not accord with the gaze of *śūnyatā* to the same extent seen in *Nirvana*.

In *Pureland*, *śūnyatā* relates to the difficulty the viewer encounters with the image. Mori’s use of horizontality and lack of depth perspective at once draws the viewer in and repulses the eye, since the viewer’s gaze cannot penetrate the

image but rather is spread out over the horizontal surface of the image. This feeling of being unable to penetrate the depths of the image leaves the viewer feeling disorientated since the expected Western convention of subject and object cannot be sustained. Even though the image appears tranquil and sweet it reveals nothing beyond this for the viewer to hold onto. The representation is so glib that it becomes a thin film barely covering that which cannot be represented; the truly horrible which is always unrepresentable (Bryson 1993: 220). The unrepresentable in *Pureland* is to my mind the digital sublime, and in chapter three I will investigate the relationship between *śūnyatā* and screen media's layered depth.

1.4 The floating world

The particular “flatness” or lack of conventional depth of the image will also be investigated in relation to a more popular visual culture in Japan, that of *ukiyo-e* prints from the Edo period. *Ukiyo-e* originates from a Buddhist concept meaning the “floating world”, and refers to the earthly world of transient pleasures. In the Edo period the word was associated with the woodblock prints depicting the past-times and entertainment of the merchant classes (Screech 2002: 22-23). It is interesting that the self-portrait of Mori and the characters surrounding it are all literally floating above the “water” or liquid expanse. She appears to refer to Buddhist values and enlightenment, albeit not specifically, and she depicts this in such a manner that drips popular culture in its artificiality and sweetness. Japanese woodblock prints are visually flat in different ways to Mori's image. Objects are outlined in black and colours are bright and not very realistic. One of the other main features of the prints is the rainbow used to print the image in different colours, gradually shading into one another. *Pureland* displays some of this rainbow quality. More striking perhaps, is that the rainbow results in a flatness of representation as it is always horizontal or vertical, but never three-dimensional.

One can see this in Hokusai's *Red Fuji* (fig. 2), in that the mountain appears flat because of the rainbow. There is no foreground and no real vanishing point. It is hard to see the image as being representative of a localised point or geographical space, and it was clearly not constructed around the principles of the Western gaze and representational perspective. What is important in this investigation is that the flatness of the screen, the flatness of *ukiyo-e* and "superflat" all inform and contribute to the flatness of *Pureland*. The diversity of these concepts contribute disparate and seemingly irreconcilable connotations and meaning to the image, but in the unifying glow of *Pureland* all the differences are airbrushed into an uneasy whole that may verge on the grotesque.

1.5 *Ukiyo-e* and *manga*: cuteness and violence

The tiny plastic aliens in Mori's image are computer generated, and although they seem three-dimensional in a sense, they are strangely monochromatic and decorative. They are similar to inflatable cartoon characters and bring to mind the popular contemporary Japanese genre entitled *anime*. Japanese animation is known to be obsessed with "cute" things, and this urge to "make things cute" is implicit in *Pureland* (Ngai 2005: 811-847). *Manga* is the comic book version of *anime* (which is animated films or series) and can be traced back to Hokusai's *Manga* (Brehm 2002: 15) and prints by other artists such as Ando Hiroshige from the Edo period. It has always been a tradition of popular representation for purposes of entertainment. Woodblock prints from the Edo period bear a striking resemblance to contemporary *manga* and *anime* in the dark outlines and flatness of representation. I refer to *anime* throughout this study, but the concept should be understood as implicitly related to *manga*.

The culture of *manga* and *anime* involves an affinity for extreme scenarios and thus it is understandable that the cuteness often depicted in *anime* goes hand-in-hand with an implicit violence. Ngai (2005:811-847) argues that cute things are often depicted as vulnerable, small and helpless, so that the consumer can

impose his or her own will on it. The “cute object is intended to excite the consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control” as much as caring instincts (Ngai 2005:811-847). *Manga* and *anime* have proven quite addictive to audiences and have become a daunting economic force. Because they are Japanese, the genres have come to represent technological progress and science-fiction (for Western viewers) and yet they retain an element of mystique for the Western viewer because they remain essentially Oriental (Sato 2004: 335-376).

“Cute” images in *manga* and *anime* are comparable in contrast to examples of grotesque imagery in these genres, such as a scene depicting a boar demon from *Princess Mononoke* (fig.3). The creature is a decaying boar-god that has become poisoned. It moves through the landscape and everything in its wake withers and dies. One can not say that the landscape in the clip is sublime, but the demon itself, in its decaying shapeless bloody form, can be seen as evocative of the grotesque sublime. The characters in the film that are confronted with it are shocked by its appearance and instinctively know that it is unnatural. They call it “cursed”. The demon is covered in a mass of leech-like worms that are black in colour. It is also dripping blood and the worms form an outer body that is shapeless and crawls with spider-like legs. The worms become a force and can move of their own accord, separately from the demon’s body, and it is revealed that the demon is the decaying body of a large wart-hog. Even if the hog itself were not affected by the worms it would still be unnaturally large and this is indicative of its divine nature. It is a spirit of the forest that has become corrupted. The hog or boar is thus much more than a mere animal, it is the embodiment of divinity in Nature; an intrinsic part of the forest and rural landscape.

Such an overtly grotesque or terrifying image is more obviously evocative of the *informe*⁸ or unrepresentable. Although it is not an image of the unrepresentable, it is merely an indication or reminder of what cannot be depicted (Bryson 1993: 216-223). It thus seems that the unrepresentable (which can be understood as that which triggers the sublime experience) is manifest in both the cloyingly sweet or cute, and the violent or grotesque depictions in *anime* and *manga*. *Pureland* employs a strategy of denial of the grotesque, but I investigate the latent sublimity which is revealed by this uncanny exclusion of anything but the very pleasant and sweet.

1.6 *Manga* and children: immersion and the sublime

The chubby little aliens in *Pureland* resemble figures frequently found in *anime*, such as the tree spirits in Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*. They also bear resemblance to Murakami's character, Dob, depicted in many of his paintings (Brehm 2002). The aliens not only resemble toys but also children. This makes sense when one regards them in the *anime* context. The genre is mostly thought of as entertainment for children, and especially Miyazaki's films seem to be aimed at children. It appears that children become immersed in what they see on television more easily than adults. This is because they do not expect or require the illusion to be realistic, but rather accept the world they are represented with, understanding that it comes with its own reality. What may not seem particularly frightening or sublime to the average adult may scare a child enormously, and

⁸ Norman Bryson (1993: 216-223) discusses the *informe* with reference to the "abject" and the photographs of Cindy Sherman. According to him, the physical human body in abjection, in pain or in depictions of horror is the only part of the human identity which cannot be absorbed into representation. He says that the body has essentially and always only existed as a construction of gender and identity, and in the digital age the body will disappear entirely, for it will exist only in representations. There is thus a return to the body in depictions of the body in abjection, which is triggered by the proliferation of represented bodies. I investigate the possibility that a similar occurrence could be taking place with regards to the landscape and landscape representations. The landscape that triggers the sublime experience denotes something of the *informe* in that it is truly un-representable. The concept of *informe* is discussed in *Formless: A user's guide* (Bois & Krauss 1997)

this capacity to invoke child-like immersion is what renders *anime* such a success.

Contemporary artist Takashi Murakami employs and manipulates the culture of *anime* and *manga* in his art. He focuses on a concept he terms “superflat” and I attempt to relate this flatness to the flatness in *Pureland*, although it is not exactly the same thing. “Superflat” (Brehm 2002: 36) refers to contemporary consumer culture and *manga*, or what is termed *otaku* culture. This relates to the cult-like status of *manga* and *anime* and the manner in which people are devoted to it as a lifestyle and outlook. The devotional cult following that *anime* has attracted changes its status, for although it is a popular phenomenon within mass culture, *otaku* see themselves as enlightened or able to understand *anime* in a way that most people cannot and do not. They believe that they have the ability or the dedication to become more immersed in *anime* than most people, perhaps in a way that children can, and this may afford them the ability to experience *anime* as sublime (Steinberg 2004: 449-471). Brehm (2002: 16-17) also interprets *otaku* culture as striving towards “being a child”. It is a metaphor for freedom outside the strict social code and *otaku* are thus also often seen by outsiders as the “least esteemed class in Japanese society”. *Otaku* are escapist, preferring to live within the fantasy world of representation rather than society. I suspect that this escapism is essentially a reflection of a popular idyllic trend in mass culture. Thus I want to investigate the possibility that *anime* may at times reveal flashes or glimmers of the digital sublime, on the premise of escapist immersion in the illusion that is presented to the viewer.

1.7 Popular culture, the idyllic and mystic

Pureland is not only informed by Japanese artistic principles and traditions, but its pleasant appearance seems to be an amalgam of the pleasant appearance of Western and Eastern popular images such as are found in Disney films and in *anime*. The appearance of the image is overly peaceful, it is pink, glowing and pretty, and the characters are floating on bubbles and air. The alien “tunes”

(Weintraub 2003: 315-321) depicted in the landscape are reminiscent of a trend in popular culture (in the West, and perhaps also in the East) during the nineteen-nineties that constituted an obsession with extra-terrestrial life, and the surmising of how such life would look. The pinkness and smoothness of the landscape itself, and the general pleasant character of the image also seems similar to pleasant scenery depicted in popular culture such as some landscape sequences (fig. 3) from the *anime Spirited Away* (2001), directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

It is my conviction however, that this pleasantness can be seen in the context of the artistic genre of landscape painting. The picturesque landscape is a trope relating particularly to the depiction of landscape in popular culture.⁹ The picturesque view of natural scenery is one that appreciates the landscape for its resemblance to well-known landscape paintings. In other words, the physical landscape becomes a place appreciated through conventions of landscape representation, and this process tames uncultivated nature. The picturesque manner of seeing appropriates and transforms natural scenery into aesthetic commodities seen as “landscapes” (Andrews 1999: 129). It is exactly this urge of commodification that has appropriated landscape conventions from the idyllic landscape tradition and turned it into mass popular images. The idyllic principles of the Virgilian Arcadia (Parada 2005), as they manifest in the pastoral landscapes of artists such as Claude Lorrain, are reconcilable with the affirmative tendency of popular culture. As Lorrain’s paintings are “easy” or “comfortable” to grasp and appreciate, their nostalgic view of nature is also easy to consume, and can easily be appropriated and reinvented within popular culture. A critical perspective is not encouraged by the pleasant scenery he conjures. The oeuvre of Henri Matisse can retrospectively be reinterpreted along the same lines. His

⁹ Malcolm Andrews (1999: 129-149) discusses the picturesque tradition in some detail in its specific eighteenth century context, with reference to the sublime and how the picturesque landscape derives from the sublime tradition a “ready made” recipe for experiencing the raw powers of nature as sublime. This tourist urge of reproducing the sublime experience at will is essentially un-sublime. The picturesque landscape employs a strategy of appropriation and commercial transformation with regard to the natural world. Natural scenery became aesthetic commodities; “landscapes”.

idea of art or culture as a “comfortable chair” enabled him to appropriate elements from foreign cultures, and reinterpret them as idyllic or exotic. His travels to Morocco did not directly inform his paintings, rather, he appropriated what he interpreted as exotic or foreign from other countries in order to inform his own “popularised” image of those countries (Flam 1973: 56-64).

Moments of epiphany or “suddenness”, as Karl Bohrer (1994: 198-226) discusses it, are often accompanied by a specific interaction with memory. Bohrer refers to Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of things past* and his memory of the Madeleine biscuit. Eating the Madeleine involuntarily brought back memories of his childhood and grandmother, as the biscuit dissolved on his tongue. The conflation of the memory (which was previously an unconscious one) and the biscuit eating experience are manifested in a sudden epiphany that may be understood through Hans Gumbrecht’s (2004: 91-133) theory of “presence”. The experience manifests itself as a sudden sensory-induced revelation. What is important is that this epiphany is experienced as an inexplicable emotion conjuring either sadness or happiness to an excessive degree; it is overwhelming and emotionally moving. Definite similarities between this “appearance” and “suddenness” and the sublime experience are to be found. What is relevant is Bohrer’s (1994: 209-212) argument that epiphany is often accompanied by images that enhance feeling, such as images of peaceful, calming natural scenery. This is symbolic of recourse to childhood and is also where memory and nostalgia play a part. The “presence” or sudden “epiphany” is the conflation of this idyllic nostalgic effect and the present moment of sensory experience. The suddenness of this experience could even relate to the concept of the “uncanny”, or Freud’s “unheimliche”, in that the experience of something familiar suddenly becomes strange or alien (Bois & Krauss 1997: 192-197).

The pleasant appearance of *Pureland* conceals an *informe* (Bryson 1993: 220), that I interpret as a sublime presence. This underlying negativity reveals the mystic tone of *Pureland*. Thus the mystic tradition, as manifest in *Pureland* is

discussed throughout this investigation with regard to the digital sublime. The idyllic tradition is discussed as a separate strand since its specific characteristics are possibly evident in the appearance of *Pureland*. The “presence” or mystic sublime evoked by artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock is informed by negativity towards representation. This negativity also relates to the gnostic concept of *kenosis* or “emptying of the vessels”, which in the context of non-representational art, such as Expressionism is a negative approach to depiction. The meaning of the work does not reside in what is depicted, but rather in what is *not* depicted or what *cannot* be depicted, the religious or sublime experience of nature. Robert Rosenblum (1975) makes a connection between Abstract Expressionist art and the mystic tradition of the Northern Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich, Philip Otto Runge and other mystic painters such as William Turner. The mystic tradition is not *visible* in *Pureland*, but in the fact that it *conceals* a sublime presence beneath the pleasant surface of the image. This indicates that the image not only employs the affirmative function of popular culture, but also the negative disruptive quality of the mystic tradition. Mori’s depiction of harmony with the natural environment can also be understood in this context since artists such as Friedrich and Runge saw in nature the revelation of divine power and experienced nature as a spiritual encounter (Rosenblum 1975: 10-40). The idyllic semblance could also relate to the “epiphanous” character of the otherworldly experience of both *Pureland* and *Nirvana*. The sublime can appear unexpectedly, materialising in the face of the observer.

Pureland is a hybrid image not only because it is an amalgam of different popular and artistic traditions, but because these traditions and the reception of images and representation that they engender seem irreconcilable. The principles informing the mystic values of Abstract Expressionism are directly contrary to the principles informing popular culture, and yet strands of meaning can be traced to both of these concepts from *Pureland*. Such a seamless convergence or hybridisation of disparate values and meanings is uniquely achievable in cyber

culture, in new media, where the medium itself can uproot, appropriate, alter and re-present all information and resulting image material (Mitchell 1992: 1-31).

1.8 Hybridity

The hybrid nature of *Pureland* is not only the result of digital compositing, it can be compared to established artistic practice ever since the Renaissance. With the advent of art historical practice the use of “sources” became a norm for investigating artistic intention. As such, Mieke Bal’s (1994) interpretation of the generation of meaning in artworks is helpful. According to her the post-modern practice of intertextuality can be contrasted with iconographic practices of meaning generation. Whereas the latter entailed an artist mostly referring back in time to historic, Biblical or master’s art sources, the former implies the generation of unique and new meanings which in turn influence the manner in which the source material is interpreted. In combining and merging such a wide variety of sources and contexts Mori creates new meaning from older sources such as *ukiyo-e*, *anime*, and even Western landscape traditions. The important conflict created in her work arises from her attempt to reconcile two disparate traditions, the affirmative idyllic tradition as it developed in popular culture, and the disruptive mystic tradition fundamentally opposed to popular culture. The question is not whether she succeeds in this endeavour, but rather, I aim to investigate the possibility of the digital sublime as a rupturing presence breaking through the bland appearance of *Pureland* and revealing the underlying mystic strand in its makeup.

The technique of digital compositing differs from earlier techniques such as collage and montage (Manovich 2001: 136-160). The latter techniques attempted to demonstrate the collapse of the artwork in avant-garde spirit. Thus meaning in works of art was purposely subverted and negated, and as such these techniques relate more extensively to the disruptive devices of the mystic tradition than to the smooth appearance of contemporary popular culture echoed

in *Pureland's* seemingly insipid prettiness. Digital compositing as technique employs existing image material and applies and alters it to blend and merge into a hybrid image. Elements are smoothed into each other. In other words, the joints are not visible, but are hidden.

Pureland displays something of a cyborg character in that it instigates human interaction with digital technology to an extent where the two entities are no longer distinct. The human viewer is drawn into the illusion of *Pureland* and *Nirvana*, and as the image extends its immersivity towards the viewer, they become almost merged (Grau 2003: 162-165). The smoothness with which the elements in *Pureland* are fused extends into the smoothness with which Mori aims to immerse the viewer in a digitally created virtual environment. Human interaction with digital technologies such as the computer and the screen has become so integrated into our sensory experiences that we regard these media as extensions of our bodies. The computer screen has become a prosthetic tool, extending human faculty to where it cannot reach¹⁰. One could surmise that most people today are cyborgs to a certain extent, in their interaction with digital and electronic technologies. The cyborg is the ultimate product of digital compositing in its uncanny¹¹ fusion of the organic and the synthetic.

It is Lyotard's (1984) conviction that the sublime as aesthetic category is continued in contemporary art through the avant-garde. Thus the affirmative idyllic strand flourishing in popular culture, which is evident in *Pureland's* facade, should indicate the image's non-oppositional stance and un-sublime character.

¹⁰ The concept of the cyborg is discussed in depth in *The cyborg handbook* (Gray 1995). Donna Haraway's (1991) writing on the subject is seminal to the ontology of the concept. Jean Baudrillard (1993) discusses technology as prosthesis from another point of view, seeing it as a threat to the original body.

¹¹ The term uncanny is related to Freud's *unheimliche* and is discussed by Rosalind Krauss (Bois & Krauss 1997: 192-197) with reference to the automaton and the doll as the human double representing at once the living human likeness and its very opposite in death. The term also refers to the sudden confrontation with an object that is strangely familiar, yet alien and repulsive. As such it can be related to the cyborg. The concept of organic humanity coexisting or fusing with inorganic machine parts can be repulsive and alienating in the context of the idea of the machine as fundamentally Other than the human body. Sources include Arnzen 1997; Jay 1998: 155-164; Masschelein 2003; Mori 1970: 33-35; and Rabaté 2005: 108-113.

The same goes for its smooth cyborg interaction with the viewer. However, I will attempt to show that the forced and exaggerated appeal of the image reveals a denial of negativity which reverses the effect of its pleasantness. Could the digital sublime suddenly appear within popular culture or the semblance of popular culture?

Chapter 2: Historical manifestations of the sublime

Multiple forms of the sublime may be found throughout the history of aesthetic thought and the history of art. Different manifestations of the sublime occurred during specific times, firstly in the human aesthetic experience of the environment and subsequently in the experience of art itself during the nineteenth century rise of modernism. Beauty as aesthetic norm gradually becomes devalued, displaced by the sublime as the dominant aesthetic category in modernity and post-modernity. On the basis of a general movement towards subjectivism in the modern era and with the twentieth century decline of rationalism the world is increasingly experienced as contingent. Hence the sublime represents a chaotic or irrationally contingent experience that cannot be understood or controlled by the human subject. A rational subject is no longer in the dominant position, although interpretation and experience is what lends the position of the subject its importance in the aesthetic experience, for instance, “das Augenblick” in existential philosophy (Tatarkiewicz 1963: 157-173). The sublime is also sudden and momentary, unlike beauty which is stable and harmonious.

The sublime in its initial modern association with art is coupled with representations of landscape and the experience of natural surroundings. Examples of sublime experiences of natural forces are earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, avalanches and shipwrecks. Catastrophes and extreme scenarios are thus associated with the sublime experience of natural surroundings (Burke 1759: 143). The social sublime transferred the aesthetic category of the sublime from the experience of natural surroundings to the experience of social revolutions. Upheavals of unprecedented magnitude and violence with their far-reaching effects on society, such as the French Revolution

and the world wars¹², could now also be experienced as sublime. With the industrial revolution the sublime potential of technological production became manifest. In the USA the development of large industries made humanity aware that the environment was no longer simply natural, but that it had become part of the industrial technological environment and vice versa (Nye 1994: 110-172). Contrary to the exaltation in technological power various Abstract Expressionist artists explored the sublime as aesthetic category in terms of a *kenotic* abstraction implying a spiritual experience, a location of human authenticity beyond the industrially based technological mass culture.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984: 36-43) theorises the post-modern sublime as essentially avant-garde. The mechanisms he identifies as sublime and avant-garde, such as the negation of representational art and the importance of the sublime “now” as contingent experience of art, can be understood in terms of the work of artists such as Barnett Newman and, I believe, Mark Rothko and Yves Klein. Lyotard is of the opinion that all avant-garde art is sublime because it subverts popular aesthetic expectations. One can apply his theory to my understanding of *Pureland*. Mori’s image is interpreted with reference to an advanced manifestation which is the digital sublime found in cyber culture and new media. If one attempts to connect Lyotard’s understanding of the sublime with the notion of the digital sublime it is perhaps worthwhile interpreting Lyotard’s theory of “now” as aesthetic experience in the light of “epiphany” or “presence” as Bohrer (1994: 198-226) and Gumbrecht (2004: 93-133) have discussed these concepts. Gumbrecht applies the concept of “epiphany” to aesthetic experience as a whole rather than just the sublime moment of the

¹² The relationship between Nazi ideals for art and patriotism is discussed by Matthew Rampley (2000: 73-96) with reference to Anselm Kiefer’s oeuvre. He places Kiefer’s work in the context of Norse mythology, pastoralism and mystical experiences, along with the ideals of the Abstract Expressionist movement. The oeuvres of Caspar David Friedrich and contemporaries in various fields such as Wagner, Frederick the Great, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Richard Dehmel, Theodor Storm and Heinrich von Kleist are seen as exemplary of the romantic pastoral tradition which is appropriated by the Nazi ideology. The romantic pastoral tradition can be understood as related to the mystic tradition. I discuss Friedrich’s work as essentially mystic in character, and conducive to sublime experience, although it is situated in the more popular German mythology interpreted by Rampley as idyllic.

manifested painting. For him, aesthetic experience, whether sublime or beautiful (in the Kantian sense) is primarily a revelation or presence that cannot be induced or guaranteed. Similar to the sublime, it confronts the viewer unexpectedly. It is momentary and may take the form of intensely moving emotion, whether it be sad or happy. It is also accompanied by a feeling of loss and nostalgia, which I attempt to relate to the idyllic nostalgia rampant in mass media.

Mariko Mori's *Pureland* represents one engagement with the digital sublime, and it should be clear that it this may take many other forms. The digital sublime can be understood as a product of what Alvin Toffler (1980: 1-34) terms the "third wave" of civilisation, namely information or knowledge industry. He broadly categorises civilisation into the "first wave" of agriculture, and the "second wave" of industry which coincides with modernity. The paintings of Friedrich, Rothko and Klein may be visually compared with *Pureland*, but are also discussed in this section to elucidate different temporal manifestations of the sublime relating to a mystic view of sublimity.

2.1 The digital sublime and new media art

Whether Lyotard would have thought that the sublime could be manifest in either the digital world of the internet and mass culture or new media art is perhaps dubious. Cyberspace has become a pervasive category of human experience in technologically advanced societies. Where Kant understood powerful natural scenery or events as likely to prompt a sublime experience, the internet can also be understood in terms of sublime power and vastness. Being artificial it probably has more in common with Nye's (1994: 110-172) technological sublime. Techno-critical writers such as Jean Baudrillard (1993: 60-70) see the rapid proliferation of technology as a threat to the integrity of humanity and our planet. The internet and mass media itself in its unrepresentability seem, from his point of view, to have gained the status of a natural force. Furthermore, the manner in which the whole cannot be comprehended at once, and only fragments of it can be viewed on any

given computer screen at a particular time is reminiscent of the Kantian sublime, since the viewer comes to the understanding of his or her physical inability to comprehend the sublime as a whole.

Although it is artificial, the one thing cyberspace has in common with natural scenery or the landscape is spatiality. The physical landscape is a place entered by the viewer and either the sheer dimensions of the space, or the forces at work within the space triggers the sublime experience (Kant 1790-99). Although not physical, cyberspace is a virtual and conceptual space that may be “entered” by the viewer. Losing one’s coherent sense of self seems a real threat in the seemingly infinite magnitude of information contained in cyberspace (Baudrillard 1993: 51-59). There is simply too much to digest. Yet computers are still switched on and off by human hands and the internet (cyberspace) is maintained and regulated by human users. The internet is at once an infinite sea of information and the tool which facilitates its usefulness to humanity.

Beneath the stable and uniform appearance, one may encounter on a computer or television screen a miasma of electronic activity. The image that appears on the screen as a whole is really never a complete image, but appears to be so because of the after-image left on the retina of the eye (Grau 2003: 192-204). The screen flickers, fluoresces and hums, it is constantly feeding information and obtaining feedback from the processor and it is potentially connected to the virtual digital world which is also what constitutes invisible cyberspace. It is the world of binary code one realises is the basis for all digital technology. Microwave ovens, television sets, sound systems and cellular phones are but a few examples. Cyberspace is not only a vast expanse, but is also constantly in flux, such as a living body or entity.

The computer screen may be understood as immersive, and because one is aware of cyberspace as virtual and not visible as a coherent physical space one is willingly immersed in the interface. What immersion implies, though, is loss of

critical distance. Although all immersive experiences are not sublime, immersivity lends itself to an instigation of the sublime. It is easier to feel disorientated and sensually challenged when experiencing an immersive environment such as virtual reality. People report “simulator sickness” such as vomiting, migraines, nausea and disorientation after immersive experiences such as those where head mounted display goggles are used (Grau 2003: 202). It is very hard to retain critical distance in an immersive situation, since it is so sensually overwhelming and foreign.¹³ One could say that such experiences are like nothing else, one cannot explain them by referring to experiences of the physical world. People with a fear of being submerged beneath water often find the experience of virtual reality terrifying, and because the virtual space is governed by rules of its own, this may be very unsettling (Grau 2003). Although a computer screen is not as fully immersive as virtual environments, the effort of traversing other virtual spaces such as cyberspace can certainly be overwhelming, and bears a resemblance to an immersive experience of virtual reality. One is immersed within something that does not exist like the physical world; it requires a surrender into its unknown.

The underlying unrepresentability, the threat or vastness, speed and power of the internet and cyberspace is manifest in many popular representations and new media artworks. The pleasant appearance¹⁴ of *Pureland* is one (albeit unlikely) manifestation of the unrepresentability of cyberspace and digital culture. *Pureland* emphasises the presence of the threat by concealing it or omitting it from the image. Because the threat is understood as unrepresentable, it cannot be represented visually for direct experience. It can be hinted at or evoked, and Mori

¹³ The loss of critical distance is seen as a negative thing in post-modern humanist (post-human) thought. In Gumbrecht's (2004: 93-133) theory of “presence” the aesthetic experience as a “moment[...] of intensity” necessarily entails something different from the experience followed by a search for meaning. While critical reflection is customary in post-modern aesthetic practice, Gumbrecht suggests that it is equally important to experience the aesthetic event in terms of presence as opposed to meaning. This desire for experiencing presence is related to the saturation and proliferation of meaning in the contemporary world.

¹⁴ Bohrer (1994: 113-147) discusses Nietzsche's theory of aesthetic “appearance” which refers to the “presence” or “suddenness” of the aesthetic rhetorical epiphany, but also to the deceptive nature of appearances.

does this by deliberately *not* evoking it, and not hinting at it.¹⁵ Other strategies would involve the depiction of the abject, the grotesque or the excessively violent¹⁶. This is seen in the decaying boar demon from Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (fig. 18). It is so horrible that it appears as an embodiment of the *informe* (Bryson 1993: 220), but of course it is not. It simply reminds the viewer of the possibility of the unrepresentable or sublime or *informe*, because it subverts the mechanisms of an "aesthetic of popular beauty" (Olivier 2001: 99). It opposes reactions of neutrality, contentment and indifference in the viewer. The significance of the digital sublime and *Pureland* is further examined in chapter three with regard to the image as representative of screen media images.

2.2 The mystic landscape and the Kantian sublime

In attempting to better understand the nuances of the digital sublime in *Pureland*, I return to the ontology of the sublime as aesthetic concept. Although the sublime is narrowly intertwined with developments in aesthetic thought and art practice, and has thus undergone many revisions, certain aspects of its ontology are still present. The sublime is still associated with the inferiority of the human subject before greater forces and power. Most importantly it is characterised by an emotionally charged implosion or reversal of feeling within the subject. The importance for Kant (1790-99: 26) was that the subject experienced a triumphant realisation of human dignity in the face of existential threat. This dynamic relied on a conception of the free rational human personality. As modernity and post-modernity dawned and the project of the Enlightenment failed, such a conception of the human personality collapsed. Following from this the sublime can no longer in post-modernity be expected to mirror the experience Kant thought it was.

¹⁵ This mechanism of negative representation is comparable to the concept of *kenosis* (emptying out) that underlies the mystic tradition of Abstract Expressionist work (Taylor 1992). McEvilley (1996) discusses emptiness in Abstract Expressionist art and in Yves Klein's art in relation to the Japanese concept of *śūnyatā* which connotes the painterly treatment of space but also the Buddhist concept of primordial space through which all beings come into being and pass away.

¹⁶ Norman Bryson (1993: 216-223) discusses how the representation of the abject serves to connote that which can truly not be represented, the *informe* or *unrepresentable*.

The sublime as Kant (1790-99) defined it is comparable to the sublime as it is interpreted in Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* (fig. 4). In the boundless space presented in *Monk by the sea* the infinite/finite dynamic of the Romantics becomes clear. It seems that the figure of a monk is standing on the brink of a mysterious void. Robert Rosenblum (1978: 21-24) says that Friedrich's figures, such as the Capuchin monk display a posture searching for a transcendental engagement with the spiritual in nature. What the monk desires is a primal immersion in God-given nature. The monk is a symbol of spiritual absorption, and the nothingness or emptiness of the landscape supports the notion of nature in some primal or primitive state. The monk is so small in relation to the natural elements that he portrays the experience of a helpless creature on the edge of a catastrophe. The figure even seems to sway under the weight of the dark sky. The foreground ends very abruptly and the lack of middle-ground leaves the viewer with a feeling of disorientation.

According to Albert Boime (1986: 433-444) the painting is also an expression of personal anguish in a surprisingly political context. The Capuchins detested Napoleon and his occupation of Friedrich's home country deeply upset patriots such as Friedrich and the poet Kosegarten, who was Friedrich's close friend and mentor. The Capuchins and their lifestyle appealed to pious North German protestants and the German romantics. They had few possessions and engaged in missionary work. They were known to roam the countryside and preach to rural folk. The monk in the painting seems a fish out of water, and this could relate to Friedrich's probable feelings of being homeless in his native country. Heinrich von Kleist reviewed the painting saying that as he looked at it he became the monk and the picture became the dune from which he beheld a natural scene (Boime 1986: 436). The viewer experiences a painful feeling of things left unresolved. There are no Christian props such as crucifixes or evergreen trees denoting eternity to guide the eye and the dissolution of perspectival illusion leaves the viewer disorientated and unsatisfied.

The feelings of extreme alienation and threat to one's identity and beliefs that manifest in the desolation depicted in *Monk by the sea* can be understood aesthetically with reference to the notion of the infinite in Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime, in his *Critique of Judgement*.¹⁷ Kant distinguished the experience of the sublime as judgements of the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. The former is related to the infinite vastness of the scene or object, and the latter to terrible forces of nature, as seen from a relatively safe vantage point. The monk in the painting seems poised on the threshold of the metaphysical spiritual realm, which is something he cannot enter into bodily, and thus he remains trapped in his uncomfortable situation. The vast spiritual realm that remains impenetrable is manifest in the looming sky. For Kant the sublime is always excited by natural scenery, and not by artificial objects. To apply his theory to a painting is already changing its essence, but since he is of the opinion that the sublime can never be represented or "contained in sensuous form" (Kant 1790-99: 25), it follows that even nature cannot really be a *presentation* of something that is sublime. Nature can be regarded as a manifestation of God's power which is infinite, but nature itself is not infinite. The sublime ultimately takes place as an event within the human subject.¹⁸

Friedrich's painting could thus evoke such a notion of limitlessness, for although we rationally know that it is not limitless it evokes or invokes the infinite or the human vulnerability in the face of it so vividly that the shock leaves one feeling disorientated. The primary constituent of a sublime experience is not the danger of the threat of the vast or powerful, but lies in the dynamic of the human reaction to this. What is truly sublime for Kant, is the human faculty of overcoming the sensory disorientation and terror through rationally being able to understand the concept of vastness and coming to the realisation of the free, rational human

¹⁷ Bretall 1939: 377-402; Brockelman 2001: 93-120; David 2005; Ferguson 1998: 322-331; Mothersill 1997: 407-412; and Nicolson 1973: 333-337.

¹⁸ This is an event that can also be characterised in retrospect as an aesthetic "epiphany" related to the insights of Gumbrecht (2004: 991-133), Bohrer (1994: 113-147, 198-226) and his understanding of the work of Nietzsche, Proust, Joyce and Musil.

personality as exalted above its threat. The triumph over vast powers of nature also leaves the human subject with a sense of his or her freedom to act at will, but with the power to triumph over temptations of the moral kind. The sublime experience thus leaves one feeling morally exalted. It is an awareness of human self-worth and dignity (Mothersill 1997: 410-411). The monk in Friedrich's painting represents such dignity. Although the monk seems physically threatened, he seems also to be on the brink of spiritual enlightenment or transcendence with regard to what is beyond the landscape in the metaphysical.

The visual discrepancies such as the diminished foreground and the lack of illusionary depth within the painting thrusts the viewer into the experience that is depicted, and as stated by Von Kleist (Boime 1986: 436), it is as if one becomes the monk and the painting becomes the threshold from which one confronts the infinite. Von Kleist describes it as a feeling of one's eyelids being cut off, with a reading of the painting that reflects a stance of animal absorption or immersion in the work, and which may be represented by the unearthly subverbal howling of wolves and foxes (Flax 1984: 19). In other words one is thrust into the desolation of the landscape (painting) with such vivid effect that one could almost imagine the howling of wolves. The viewer literally has no ground to stand on, there is nothing in the foreground to orientate the position of the viewer, and one is violently thrust into the position of the monk. I refer to a contemporary stance on such a violent disorientation of the viewer, since it can be regarded as avant-gardist in its disruptive technique. It is also similar to Nietzsche's theory of aesthetic appearance as Bohrer (1994: 113-147) understands it. The aesthetic moment takes place suddenly and terror combined with pleasure is experienced. It is a process that Nietzsche understood as Dionysian in character, in that it places one in a primordial confusion of fantasy referring back to the original chaos of human nature.

The spectator is prompted to search for depth in the shallow horizon, but the sky is opaque and offers no clue as to where the eye should focus. The monk is an

insubstantial point of reference and does not satisfy the urge of the viewer to penetrate the depths of the landscape. What is strange with respect to the representation of the sky, is that it is painted in thick tactile strokes, making it physically dense. This forms a contrast to the foreground, as that which is nearer in perspectival terms, the figure and the beach, is painted in thinner veils of colour. This contrast between distance and proximity, finitude and infinitude, figure and ground, subverts the principles of one point perspective and illusory depth. Following these principles, an artist would usually depict that which is nearer in a denser, intensely coloured manner to create a clear focal point, and that which is further away in thinner insubstantial layers of paint. Friedrich's contradiction of this creates the feeling of the painting disintegrating into its illusionary depth. The sky is no longer just illusionary sky because the illusion is contradicted by the appearance of paint. Koerner (1990: 119-121) surmises that this might be telling of what Friedrich wanted to depict. It is as if the human subject is simply overcome by the elements, and in the human yearning to transcend the material world, one ultimately becomes trapped in the very basic nature of physical humanity. The viewer experiences this frustration as the painting offers no clear transcendental meaning to the spectator. In attempting to find the deeper significance in the work one is hindered by the very element that would at first seem to be its crux; the sky. One is tempted to continue looking into the undefined distance for a revelation or apparition of some sort, but in the end one can only stare into an impenetrable surface of paint.

2.3 The technological sublime and Abstract Expressionism

Ever since Kant's theories, the sublime as an aesthetic category endured a number of changes and after the eighteenth-century has been applied to a larger spectrum of human experiences than encounters with natural scenery or depictions thereof. The French Revolution may be understood as an instance of the social sublime, as can many subsequent insurrectionary situations and terrorist violence. Mirzoeff (1995: 73) says that the French Revolution saw a

“spectacular revival of popular violence”. The heads of the governor of Bastille, de Launay and his deputy were displayed on sticks at the Church of Saint-Roch in a parade on July 16, 1789. Throughout the following three years brutal mutilations could be witnessed in the streets. It is clear that the Revolution was a unique event in its violent extremity. The social sublime applies to a “state of exception” (Bredekamp 1999: 258-261), in that it is a situation so extreme that it has no precedent. The extremely large scale of the violence and human suffering caused by such events, as well as the terror of death, can render the experience of war sublime¹⁹. In art, the counterpart of the social sublime may be seen in revolutionary or political artworks such as those of Goya and Gericault. The social sublime is not immediately relevant to this study, and thus it will suffice to mention it briefly, as it leads up to the sublime manifest in the “third wave” of technology which is cyber culture (Toffler 1980: 17-34). An event that perhaps conflates the social sublime and the digital sublime is the recent 9/11 destruction in the USA. The media coverage of the incident and its large-scale broadcast made the terrible experience accessible to millions of people over the world, rendering the shock and terror of it larger than life.

Rosenblum (1978) traces the sublime right through from Romantic landscape painting such as that found in Friedrich’s *Monk by the sea*, to Abstract Expressionist painting. This modernist movement is contemporaneous with the technological sublime as discussed by David Nye (1994: 110-172). He sees the technological sublime as an awe inspired by man-made constructions, conditions and environments, and thus the products of the industrial revolution in the USA. Fireworks, electricity, large machinery, weaponry and other technological objects that were manufactured in the USA (and elsewhere in the world) may be understood as objects inspiring sublime experiences. Kant’s sublime was accompanied by an initial humbling of the human being before Nature, the technological sublime exalted in the conquest of Nature. However, as pointed out

¹⁹ Contemporary social crises gain a sublime status through media broadcast of the events, such as the Gulf War (Baudrillard 1993)

by Adorno (1997) this conquest lead to another “Administered World”, or another nature to be subjected to. Electrical lighting could heighten the sublimity of both artificial and natural objects. One can imagine being on the roof of a skyscraper in a large city such as New York. The first reaction would probably be astonishment and awe at the vastness of the city. Even though one can understand that the city is man-made, its seemingly infinite appearance can still shock the senses into a sublime state, and the fact that these are all the products of human hands reinforces the feeling of human exaltation over natural forces.

The technological sublime, inspired by the human-made environment, is contradictory in its positive view of industry to the “abstract sublime” which relates to the modernist movement of Abstract Expressionism (McEvelley 1996). Whereas the technological sublime is inspired by the material environment, the metaphysical or spiritual realm is what leads one to the sublime through the work of the Expressionists. McEvelley (1996) discusses the monochrome and its relation to ideas of infinity, mysticism and the sublime. What is interesting is that he notes that many artists such as Mallarmé and Yves Klein (fig. 6) regarded blue as a special analogue of the sublime, since it is associated with the sea and the sky, which are the closest to limitless external objects humans can experience. Klein also said that his paintings were not paintings but that one could look through them and see the infinite blue sky beyond. In Buddhist thought the enlightened mind is likened to the open sky (McEvelley 1996: 59), and in containing nothing also contains everything. Klein is also known for his exhibition titled “Le Vide”, which consisted of nothing but a gallery space painted white (Restany 1982: 47-60).

Rothko’s work *Blue, green and brown* (fig. 5) is very near monochrome and it is impossible to pin down a figure-ground distinction in the work. His work relates more to the metaphysical monochrome than to the materialist monochrome. The former is the attempt to invoke an illusionistic field representing infinite space in the line of spiritual absolutism, while the latter is more a plainly stated material

object with sculptural overtones in the Marxist tradition (McEvilley 1996). Works such as Rothko's *Blue, green and brown* (fig. 5) and Klein's *IKB 181* (fig. 6) attempt to awaken in the viewer an awareness of absolute space within the self, and thus engulfs the self from within. In functioning as a trigger of awareness of a greater Self it engulfs the smaller self within the viewer. The smaller self is the same self overwhelmed in the Kantian sublime, and the greater Selfhood is the exalted realisation of human dignity and morality resulting in the Kantian sublime experience (McEvilley 1996: 66).

According to Renée de Vall (1995: 69-75), Rothko's work defies comprehension as a whole, since there are no sharp contrasts for the eye to focus on. One is left floating one's gaze over the surface of the work, and yet not arriving at a solid impression of the work. The rectangular forms at the bottom of the canvas encourage the eye to move horizontally, and yet their low positioning on the canvas opposes this tendency. At the same time the rectangular forms are transparent and afloat. The movements in opposite directions draw the gaze of the spectator apart. The spectator is thus forced to open his or her eyes very widely, and this dreamy gaze encourages the viewer to be sucked deeper into the painting. This wide-eyed gaze is similar to the feeling of having one's eyelids severed, associated with Friedrich's work. The lines around the outside of the work may act as a frame, directing the spectator's gaze towards the inside of the painting, but at the same time the rectangular shapes may be understood as a barrier to the gaze, opaque and flat. There is a constant oscillation between these two possibilities, and one cannot pin the image down to one possibility. One may get lost in this painting, and yet it is too unsettling to leave the viewer dreaming away in peace. Like Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* (fig. 4), the eye is trapped on the brink of a transcendence that is simultaneously implied and negated. In my own painting, *The floating world* (fig. 13) the sublime is brought into relation with not only the digital world, but also with contemporary painting. Whereas Klein and Rothko's paintings signalled what they believed to be the

“death” of painting, I attempt to show that this medium is relevant not only retrospectively, but also with regard to the digital sublime.

2.4 Lyotard and the sublime

Whereas Kant understood the sublime as the experience of a manifestation in the natural environment, Lyotard²⁰ sees the post-modern sublime as manifest only in avant-garde art. In fact he surmises that it is the duty of avant-garde art to be sublime. Lyotard’s understanding of the sublime relates to Abstract Expressionist art in as far as it is avant-garde, and employs the negative dynamic of subverting representational expectations of spectators (cf. David 2005: 1-8). The unrepresentable can occur in art when representation is avoided, in work such as Yves Klein’s monochrome paintings and Mark Rothko’s work. Avant-garde art is not only this though, it is also something indigestible, not easily consumed by the public as it does not follow the expected visual or aesthetic principles (Lyotard 1984: 36-43). Work such as that of Yves Klein, Rothko, Barnett Newman, Malevich and other Abstract Expressionists leave the viewer puzzled. The paintings by these artists, such as those of Klein’s IKB series, seem to have little to them, from a technical and visual point of view. This is so extreme that it poses a problem for the viewer. What do the paintings allude to? What do they mean? Klein says his paintings are images of the blue sky, that one looks through them to the sky beyond (McEvelley 1996: 70). They deny the “solace of good forms” and break the rules by seeking new possibilities for representation that are not subject to an established “consensus of good taste” (Malpas 2002: 202).

One could say that they allude to themselves, but more broadly than that to the moment of the viewer’s experience of the work. For Lyotard (1984) the sublime is about “now”, the moment that takes place as opposed to nothing happening. The

²⁰ There are many sources on Lyotard that are not explicitly mentioned in the text, including: Costello 2000: 76-87; Lyotard 1989; Lyotard 1989: 181-195; Lyotard 1990: 297-304; Rajchman 1998: 3-16; and Ross 2005: 33-45.

threat that all things may end and nothing will happen is what triggers the sublime experience. The event of the artwork's existence in the face of the terror of the sublime and its threat of privation constitutes that sublime "now". This "now" is at once the threat of privation (the end of all events), which is anticipation and the relief afforded by the artwork itself and which then meets that anticipation with its own existence. It is the unrepresentable which cannot be pre-determined, for who can say what this "now" looks like. It is simply an event and can be seen as contingent. This event could be the "aesthetic appearance" of Nietzsche that Bohrer (1994: 118) also calls "suddenness" or the "presence" that Gumbrecht (2004) refers to. The event becomes the trigger of the sublime when it is experienced by the viewer. The sublime is the sudden appearance of the experience of aesthetic intensity (Gumbrecht 2004:118). This intensity can in Nietzschean terms refer to the chaos of rapture, which seems to refer to a primordial animal state in which the human intellect is negated in favour of surrender to the moment. Seen in this context, the avant-garde artwork has a sense of the ontological, as not mimetic of nature but as an existence of its own, as "elementary" or at the "origin" of painting as art (Lyotard 1984: 41).

Lyotard (1984: 36) also says that the sublime, as Barnett Newman wrote about it in the sense of "now", has to do with time. Not the time that is thought of with nostalgia, drama or in the context of history, nor the idealised 'primitive' past, and thus also not the romanticised or utopian future, but the here and now, the sublime in the shock of the moment of its manifest existence. As such it relates to the argument surrounding nature and technology, or the dilemma of nature or the landscape depicted through technology or as amalgam with technology. Regardless of utopian visions of the future or past in this dialectic, there is always the underlying 'now' which is neglected, the fact that both these concepts have to coexist and have already become intertwined, whether this is good or bad, has nothing to do with the sublimity of the viewer's realisation of it.

The digital sublime evoked by Mori is the manifestation of a moment, comparable to Newman's "now" (Lyotard 1984: 36-43). What is concealed beneath the smooth pacific appearance of the image is unstable, unrepresentable. It manifests only momentarily, and while the viewer may experience discomfort or feel suspicion when regarding the pleasant *Pureland*, the underlying presence is not visible except peripherally. What remains un-represented in the image can only be apprehended in the flickering of the screen, the short-circuiting of the paradisiacal hologram wielded by Mori. The unrepresentable is couched in the workings of *Pureland* and *Nirvana* like a subliminal message of horror embedded between the frames of a Disney film.

Chapter 3: The digital sublime: screen and frame

With the discourse of the sublime contextualised, the digital sublime in *Pureland* may be examined specifically. It is latent in the image through the operations of the computer screen and cyberspace, the glow of the screen, and the immersivity involved in interactions with the computer screen. These relate to the diverse functions of the computer. It can refer to the physical electronic activity, the mechanical workings of the hardware of computers, servers and networks. On the other hand the operations also involve cybernetic principles that inform the processes of communication with computers such as the principle of feedback. Communication strategies could also include interaction with the computer screen.²¹ Lastly, rhetorical strategies and aesthetic reception could apply to visual interaction with the computer display. One views the screen in certain ways and with certain degrees of imaginative participation in deriving meaning from it. *Pureland* is not an outward manifestation of a terrifying force, but its pleasant “plastic” features mask the teeming presence of interconnectivity in the digital age, just as the screen monitors the mechanisms and actions that contribute to what is displayed to the user.

The perspective or depth conception engendered by screen media is unique since it is a hybrid of framing mechanisms, perspectival devices and the negation of geometrical depth in favour of virtual depth experience elicited through immersion. The altered presentation, perception and representation of depth in screen media and new media art in turn impacts on older media such as painting, and it is important to establish the connections and severances between depth and immersion in older and new media. The depiction of expanse and landscape space was often linked or conducive to the sublime experience of an artwork,

²¹ Sources on cybernetic principles and communication include S.T. Bok's *Cybernetica* (1959) and C.A. van Peursen's *Informatie* (1968). Lev Manovich's *The language of new media* (2001) situates these principles within the post-modern concept of new media.

and thus establishing the parameters of the digital sublime necessitates an investigation into the remains and mutations of the frame and pictorial space. To this end I attempt to relate my conclusions regarding the frame and depth in new media art to painting itself, in discussing one of my own paintings.

3.1 New media and the screen

Pureland was not only produced digitally but bears the marks of new media in more fundamental ways. A key to unravelling the conceptual and visual sources of this image may lie in the light or glow emanating from it. No localised light source is depicted and the image seems to be evenly lit in an apparently artificial manner. This artificial glow resembles the glow of a computer or even television screen. I refer to these two screens because both imply a way of interacting or looking at them that cannot be found with the cinema screen. The two screens mentioned above are usually smaller (except for big-screen televisions) than the viewer, and the screen is understood as a monitor of communication networks, whether it be television or the internet. The two are also becoming interchangeable to some extent. It is reasonably common practice to watch films on one's computer, and it is even possible to connect one's television to the computer so that it functions as a monitor for either television programmes or channels, or the computer.

Pureland is lit from behind since it is displayed as a lightbox. The evenly distributed light inherent in the image even when not displayed on a light box, does not accord with ambient light in landscape representation. In fact, when one looks at the even illumination of the human figure's robes (a self-portrait of the artist), it seems to be indoor light, but more specifically the light of a camera flash. The alien figures surrounding the human figure seem to be individually lit and yet neither do they reflect the light in a natural manner. Each object is "cut and pasted" into the composited landscape of *Pureland*. The elements that are inserted into (onto) the landscape matrix contribute different nuances to the work,

and the smoothness of the image does not always reconcile the diversity of meanings Mori attempts to “add to the mix”.

A computer screen glows from behind and is its own source of light. The glow is not static or even (as it appears to the human eye) but oscillates. This glow is the manifestation of the movement of electronic energy within the screen. The screen does not display all the digital processes taking place to compose the display, rather, the processes within are often forgotten, as the screen displays a consistent appearance. It is static in that it does not display the activity monitored by the screen; the activity contributes to providing a continuous image. The digital activity that takes place within the computer is potentially connected to a network of other digital systems across the globe. Although one sees one image on the computer screen, the activity of binary code and the flow of information are forces in a universal code feeding information into all the digital systems of the world. *Pureland* is an image that evokes expanse and infinity in its featureless appearance, but also conceals the infinity of the digital information world; the expanse of cyberspace pulsating beneath its glow.

The computer screen is an “agent” of the internet and cyberspace; it is the “face” of cyberspace. Martin Buber’s theory of the dialogical hermeneutic method, of a possible dialogic relationship between a text and its interpreter, is extended to the relationship between an artwork and its creator or the work and a viewer²² (Kepnes 1992: 19-40). A work of art can “blaze up into presentness” into the status of a “Thou”, confronting the viewer with its appearance. This presence I understand as very similar to the “presence” of the aesthetic experience referred to by Gumbrecht (2004: 91-133). The process is a mutual dialogue of “presentness” between the viewer and the artwork. In its sublime manifestation, cyberspace has the potential to be compared to the artwork in Buber’s theory. The computer as medium for the image is not humanised or masked behind

²² Buber is known for his interpretations of Hasidic texts.

human attributes, but rather has the potential to manifest as more than machinery in sudden moments of epiphany and “presence”.

In using the internet one is always aware of its complicated, limitless and unstable character. One can only ever see a very small part of the whole, and in its superabundance, constant flux, lightning speed, and seemingly uncontrollable growth, it is likened to the sublime, inconceivable unrepresentable. In *Pureland* a feeling of expanse or space is evoked in the featureless space of the image, but also in the horizontal orientation of the image seeming to continue beyond the outside edges of the image. This space is not only comparable to the mystic space evoked in *Monk by the sea*, but it can also evoke the digital world.

3.2 Created environments and immersivity

The seemingly vast space of *Pureland* was compared with Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* in section 2.2. The self-portrait component of the image floating or flying over (or across the backdrop of) the landscape can also be interpreted with reference to the sublime. The gliding movement through space is even better realised in the 3D video installation *Nirvana*, from which *Pureland* is taken as a still image. The following still images (figures. 8-10) are thus taken from *Nirvana*. The immersivity *Nirvana* so clearly demonstrates is definitely visible in *Pureland*. I thus refer to both *Nirvana*, the video, and *Pureland*, the printed image, in the following discussion. In the video installation *Nirvana*, Mori's portrait is traversing the space depicted in an extraordinary manner, by flying or gliding across it. Does this movement imply something about the depicted space? What does it imply for *Pureland* and the notion of the pictorial frame?

If one regards the Mori self-portrait as a figure of spectator engagement, it could be that her gliding movement through the space of *Nirvana* is meant to guide the viewer to interpret the pictorial space as virtual and immersive. In *Pureland* the Mori-figure does not move physically, but motion is implied in the posture of the

figure and composition of the tiny aliens surrounding her. The relative featurelessness of the environment at once gives a feeling of depth and impenetrability. Similar to the way in which the sky in *Monk by the sea* (fig. 4) is impenetrable to the eye on account of its obvious painterly qualities, *Pureland* is impenetrable because of its overt flatness and opacity. According to Louis Marin (1996:80-95) the framing of a work of representation can be understood according to three devices: the background, the field and the frame. The visual difficulty that *Pureland* entails for the viewer may be clearer when understood in relation to these concepts. The background of a landscape representation may be understood as a delineation of the limits of illusory depth created in a representation. The horizon that is so noticeable in Mori's image serves very strongly to appear at once in the distance and not at all. This is because the horizon alone, with no point of reference in the landscape features, is merely a dark line, and only through pictorial convention is it interpreted as a horizon. Marin says that the background can easily become a surface or a fundamental layer, and in *Pureland*, where the objects are individually added onto the background of the landscape, this is especially true.

The representational field covers the entire image, and it is perfectly transparent. This field is what I interpret as the screen in *Pureland*. Marin (1996: 81) is of the opinion that the representational field is what has made narrative figures seemingly oblivious to being watched by the spectator. The spectator cannot break through this field unless it materialises to the viewer as it does in *trompe l'oeil* details in painting. What renders *Pureland* so flat is its ambiguity. The field and the background appear on the same level of illusory depth in places where there are no figures. This is because the landscape is so featureless. The physical frame of a work has implications of delimiting, or indicating that the work is an autonomous reality. It functions in a similar way to the frame of Alberti's window (Damisch 1996), limiting the illusion to what is inside, and indicating that everything outside the frame is not part of what is inside. In *Nirvana* the Mori-figure breaks through the representational field (or screen), and through virtual

illusion draws the spectator inside the frame, inside the screen. The viewer looks at *Nirvana* with 3D glasses, and the portrait of Mori glides out of the background and into the space of the spectator. She comes out of the image, and this extends the space of the image until the viewer might as well be inside the image.

The space of immersion which is the virtual (invisible or unreal) environment of the experience, is experienced in a similar way to the virtual depth of cyberspace. Such spatial experiences do not just apply to new media, however, and in the context of the digital sublime even non-digital environments may be experienced as screen-like or virtual. The principle of immersivity is that the observer feels him-or-herself to be within the image (Grau 2004: 339-341). In James Turrell's installation *Spread* (2003) the observer really enters the "screen", or breaks through the representational field into the space inside the frame. The space *is* the installation. In an installation shot of *Spread* (fig. 7), the spectators have walked "*into* the picture" and are completely immersed in a tactile blue vapour or light. The utopian ideal of climbing into the image or being completely immersed in a depicted reality is not a post-modern phenomenon, at least as far as this is the aim of most immersive media since the frescoes in the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii (Grau 2003:25). It also relates to the television and computer screen, even though the immersion experienced when interacting with these screens is not immersive to the same degree as virtual environments. In *Spread* the viewer is confronted with a source of light at the back wall of the installation, which appears to be a screen. It is in actual fact just a lighting effect though, but creates the feeling that the observer is inside some kind of (non-existent) metaphorical screen. The light source glows like a screen, but it is insubstantial. Whereas the monk as spectator figure is threatened by the enveloping expanse in Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* (fig. 4), the spectator here physically steps *into* the sublime expanse of the screen. On the other hand, the expanse evoked within the small frame of Friedrich's painting subverted the limitations of the picture frame, but in

Spread the viewer is swallowed into the picture frame which implodes into a seeming expanse.

The immersion engendered in *Nirvana* is not just a visual effect. Mori's self-portrait is unbound by the "flat", vast space and seems to correspond to a religious state of enlightenment, that of "nirvana". Such a state represents a form of ecstasy comparable to the experience of the sublime in the mystic tradition. For artists in the mystic tradition, e.g. Friedrich, only a select few were endowed with the sensitivity and grace to experience the sublime and spiritual enlightenment.²³ This is visible in the appearance of detachment and alienation in figures depicted in sublime situations such as the Capuchin monk in *Monk by the sea*. Although the monk is a spectator figure, he is also detached from the spectator, unreachable. He is in the foreground and yet it seems that he is seen from a distance.

What Mori seems to propose is an ecstasy for everyone; hence she refers to popular culture by using the small "alien" figures easily recognisable as a reference to *anime* and *manga* culture. She attempts to make the sublime and spiritually enlightening mystic experience "pretty" and accessible. Mori wants to depict an enlightened state that no longer belongs to a select few. Through technology and digital media the viewer is artificially immersed in the "nirvana" she creates. According to Grau (2003: 339-342) immersive art uses elements of ecstatic transport and exhilaration that can be described as Dionysian, and since immersive art often "moulds propagandist messages" it is not conducive to critical reflection and distance. Processes transforming consciousness may also result, and power over the observer is reinforced through the illusion that attempts to relocate the observer within the image.

²³ This view of the sublime experience can be regarded as occult in so far as the term refers to that which is hidden and secret. It thus accords with the disruptive strategies employed by artists in the mystic tradition, and runs contrary to the affirmative (non-occult) tendencies in popular culture.

Even though Mori employs immersive strategies to evoke a state of ecstasy in the viewer, the very definition of the mystic ecstatic experience opposes such a “recipe” for its induction. Gumbrecht (2004: 102-104) states that moments of “presence” or “intensity” cannot be induced or predicted, since they are characterised by suddenness. (Indulge my cumbersome clustering together of the concepts of the sublime experience, the mystic experience and the aesthetic experience of “suddenness” or “presence” in order to appreciate my point.) Gumbrecht goes on to say that one can foster a disposition of composed openness or “focus” in order to anticipate the energising experience of an experience or object to come. The question remains whether Mori’s *Nirvana* or *Pureland* can succeed in fostering such openness in the observer as to evoke the presence of sublimity that I discern. The immersivity of the experience that she instigates *could* perhaps be compared to Gumbrecht’s “focus” of openness.

Receptive focus can often be encouraged by an immersive environment. James Turrell’s installation, *Unseen blue* (fig. 12), is a constructed installation space where one is immersed in the effects of changing light from a natural source and its interaction with a constant source of artificial light within the space. The space has a rectangular aperture in the ceiling through which the sky is visible. Inside the space the walls are white on an upper panel and wooden below, with subtle fluorescent lighting installed along the periphery, where the wall meets the wood. Where *Nirvana* and *Pureland* make reference to landscape elements, Turrell’s installation is a viewing device or a medium for experiencing a landscape element that is just as unrepresentable (unseen) and difficult to experience as virtual space; the sky. Turrell changes one’s perception of the sky in registering or instigating subtle simultaneous colour differences between the sky in the aperture and the space inside. In Mori’s installation (*Nirvana*) the viewer is essentially surrounded by an image that appears two-dimensional if not viewed with 3D glasses. Turrell’s installation is a physical environment, and is activated with natural light, but the effect the installation has on the viewer is one of

immersion that may be compared with the virtual immersion the viewer experiences in *Nirvana*.

The viewer is expected to enter the constructed space of *Unseen blue* physically, and the time of day will determine the contrasts created between the light outside and the light inside. It is important to note that the space of the installation is not neutral. The installation is lit from the inside with artificial light emphasising the museum-like character of the space. The lighting inside the space is balanced with the light outside so that it affects the way one perceives the light of the sky (Trachtman 2003: 86). The “unseen” element that the title of the work alludes to is a combination of, or the effect of the simultaneously changing light and the contrasts thus created. These manifestations are unique and cannot be imitated or predicted, since subtle changes in the natural light outside (which are unpredictable) will determine the contrasts. The true experience of the work is thus never the same, giving it a character of “suddenness” and contingency. This unpredictable experience may relate to the experience of the sublime as Lyotard (1984: 36-43) interprets it with relation to the moment of its manifestation as “now”, as the subversion of privation in the existence of the aesthetic moment of experience.

The experience of the sky as a landscape element which is present, but cannot be pinned down, is comparable to the unrepresentable. The sky is thin air, it seems to be nothing and yet it is vast in its presence. What *Unseen blue* does, like other Turrell skyspaces (or installations to view the sky), is to bring the sky nearer to the viewer. Viewed from the inside of the installation it seems that the viewer is looking at a slab of substance changing colour, not at the sky as far away it is normally perceived (Trachtman 2003: 86-94). Turrell wishes for the viewer to be directly confronted with light, and to experience it as never before. The interplay between the light outside and inside the space creates something similar to Mori's *Pureland*. Only in the imagination of the viewer can the space become whole, the virtual space only exists in the mind (the imagination) or the

experience of the observer. The experience of *Unseen blue*, is something unseen, it is an experience only really manifest in the moment of experience of the observer.

The blue monochrome paintings of Yves Klein and his theory of boundless space is comparable to Turrell's *Unseen blue* (McEvilley 1996). In order to be able to depict infinite space, he interprets his monochrome blue canvases as "portraits" of the sky. In this manner he subverts the limitations of the frame of the canvas which place limits on the depiction of infinity. One would thus look through his paintings as windows on the sky, or look through the shape of the canvas at the boundless space beyond it. Turrell has taken the real sky and given us a real window which then becomes a canvas or a physical manifestation in a reversal of Klein's strategy. The sky is not really infinite, but in the manner of the Kantian sublime, evokes the truly infinite or unrepresentable, that which cannot be represented. Turrell takes what seems unrepresentable and makes it manifest to the viewer.

It is the experience of a framed part of the natural landscape in *Unseen blue* which makes it a non-natural experience. The appearance and mechanisms of the installation are very much like that of a room with a large flat-screen television (or computer screen). Similar to when one interacts with a television or computer screen, the rest of the physical world recedes into the background of one's awareness. When Mori glides across the landscape in *Nirvana* it extends the space and one becomes aware of the dimension of the space even though it appears flat. The same applies to cyberspace. One can only immerse oneself in it because it implies a larger "world" that can be entered by looking at or into it. This is also the case when watching a film or television, or in engaging with another immersive technology such as virtual reality. With these one becomes involved or immersed in another existence, a place one can "enter" by viewing parts of this existence on a screen. This immersive focus of attention is once again similar to the composed openness that Gumbrecht (2004: 104)

understands as sympathetic to an intense aesthetic experience of “presence” or “suddenness”. Thus the immersion *Unseen blue* engenders, contributes to the potential of the experience to be evocative of the sublime presence or moment.

3.3 Japanese painting and non-Western perspectival devices

The comparison between *Pureland* and Friedrich’s *Monk by the sea* has yielded some insights into the visual and conceptual implications of impenetrability. Both are finally opaque or impenetrable to the gaze instead of offering the viewer the idyllic transparency seemingly promised at first glance. The featurelessness of both works is also the effect of an alternative depiction of depth through a subversion of Western perspectival mechanisms.²⁴

Norman Bryson (1988: 88-101) compares the relationship between Western concepts of perspective,²⁵ the implications Western visual mechanisms have for the spectator, and a Japanese understanding thereof. He begins by discussing emptiness or nihility, which I discussed in terms of the sublime in section 2.2. In the context of Japanese art however, this notion has broader implications, and is known as *śūnyatā*. Bryson then relates it to the Western concept of the ‘Gaze’ which implies that the object is viewed by the subject and whether their positions threaten each other or not, vision is always a two-way exchange between them. He then considers the Japanese concept of *śūnyatā* where the object no longer exists at the opposite end of a tunnel of vision, but in the “total field of the

²⁴ The “field” of representation which Marin (1996: 80-81) discusses as partly constituting the general framing of representation is conflated in Mori’s image and in Friedrich’s painting with the background, which is another of the framing mechanisms. In areas where the space is particularly featureless one is not sure whether one is looking at the “field”, which covers the entire work and separates it from the observer, or at the “background”. The “background” itself places a boundary on the illusory depth created in a representation. It can become a surface, turning the representation into a “picture”. The featurelessness of the landscape and horizon in both *Pureland* and *Monk by the sea* suggests at once an infinite illusory depth of “background” and the negation of depth in a conflation with the representational “field” which closes the representation off from reality outside as with a television or computer screen.

²⁵ The origins of Albertian perspective are discussed by Hubert Damisch (1994). Michael Kubovy (1986) also discusses the Renaissance ontology of representational perspective. When I refer to “perspectival mechanisms” I include reference to these sources but also more broadly to the “mechanisms of framing” as discussed by Louis Marin (1996: 79-95).

universal remainder". The concept of *śūnyatā* applied to vision includes what is not seen, what is beyond the vision of the spectator, comparable to the sublime's function as the unrepresentable. The frame as a visual device is undermined, and the viewer is pulled away from the viewfinder or lens and is dis-framed. What is seen and not seen and partially seen (*śūnyatā*) is also unrepresentable in terms of Western perspective and the frame. Such unrepresentability may be overwhelming and threaten the position and identity of the observer, and as such can be translated as a sublime experience. The mechanism of *śūnyatā* seems comparable to the sublime mechanism of concealment and the unrevealing character of *Pureland* and Friedrich's *Monk by the sea*, as discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2.

There is thus an affinity, however unlikely, between the spread-out perspective of the screen in its virtual potential, and the non-Western perspective of Japanese landscape (or more correctly, spatial) representations. *Śūnyatā* is not only related to the "gaze", but McEvilley (1996: 78) also relates it to representation, and the application of the principle in the landscape paintings of Japanese artist Kubota. McEvilley relates *śūnyatā* and the emptiness of *śūnyatā* to the Buddhist thought on "emptiness" to monochrome painting. As such it is seen as the space where things can happen but also the black hole that threatens or ends the existence of all happenings. This *śūnyatā* is thus comparable to Lyotard's understanding of the sublime as the threat of privation, and the negation of the threat in the manifestation of "now" in the avant-garde artwork. Both can be related to Abstract Expressionist painting in its non-representational mechanisms; where the painting is manifest without meaning or representational significance. It serves only to affirm its moment of aesthetic experience or confrontation with the observer (Lyotard 1984: 36-43).

Śūnyatā can be understood as a floating gaze. The viewer does not seem to attempt to impose a structure of seeing onto the landscape.²⁶ Representation that springs from this manner of seeing will thus not display perspectival devices²⁷ in the Western tradition. In one of my own paintings, *The floating world* (fig. 13), the image (or representational “field”) “floats” over a series of canvases that are installed in loose configuration. While in *Pureland* (fig. 1) the objects inside the landscape appear to float, the elements of the landscape and *space itself* are floating in *The floating world*. Infinite space is implied within the frame of *Pureland*, but the space of the canvas itself in *The floating world* seems to dissolve into nothingness. The black lump of mountain spanning over the two larger canvases in *The floating world* is a borrowed Japanese landscape motif, but more importantly, the mountains and tree-like objects, float in a non-space. The landscape elements are not placed within a perspectival structure in order to create depth. Linocut prints on the surface of the painting also negate the creation of depth. The smooth background resembles the gently shaded sky and “sea” of *Pureland*, and it recalls the rainbow-like shades one finds in *ukiyo-e* prints such as Hokusai’s *Fuji in clear weather* (fig. 2). The rainbow shading in Hokusai’s print actually flattens out the mountain horizontally even though it is presumably a device to create a sense of scale and distance. The little marks at the foot of the mountain are also ambiguous in that they could be indicative of trees seen at a great distance, but one is inclined to understand them as brush marks. Similarly, in *The floating world*, the dripping marks below many of the mountain masses negate their volume and mass, since it implies that they are floating and are flat or two-dimensional. It also draws attention to the paint as medium, as opposed to being an illusionary (transparent) device. The background in *The floating world* alternates between the illusion of flatness and

²⁶ It may of course be argued that *śūnyatā* itself is just another “gaze”, filter or device through which the viewer regards the object. What is important is Bryson’s emphasis on the non-dominant roles assigned to both subject and object in the Buddhist and Japanese tradition of *śūnyatā*. The concepts of subject and object become looser and flow into each other. The subject becomes almost immersed in the object, because the object is all around, and vice versa.

²⁷ I refer here not only to the Albertian perspective, but to the mechanisms of framing, “background”, representational “field” and “frame”, as discussed by Louis Marin (1996: 79-95).

depth, creating a layer onto which objects are attached.²⁸ The surface is ambiguous, and in much the same way that the smooth atmosphere and “sea” in *Pureland* seem to invite the spectator to discover a visual or spiritual answer within its depths, only to be confronted with the opaque surface of the representational “field”, one is not sure whether it disguises depth or not.

The floating world is a hybrid painting since it combines different perceptions and principles of depiction of depth, whether these principles are related to geometrical space, perspectival depth and pictorial framing devices, the virtual depth of screen media or the expanse of the digital sublime. The effects which Mori applies in *Pureland* are among others appropriated from landscape traditions. Works such as Mori’s which employ screen media, in turn impact on landscape painting and the depiction of space in painting. The digital sublime is not only latent in *Pureland*, but can also potentially manifest in artworks of older media and traditions such as landscape painting.

²⁸ The “flatness” and “depth” is the result of the ambiguity between the representational “field” and the “background” (Marin 1996: 79-95).

Chapter 4: *Anime* and the sublime dialectic

The previous chapter dealt with the comparability of the different “flat” perspectives discernible in *Pureland*. The “flatness” of the screen and the “floating” perspective of *śūnyatā* along with the “flatness” of *ukiyo-e* were discussed as being evident in source material for *Pureland*. The hybrid nature of digitally composited images such as *Pureland* often presents a smooth, seamless appearance, which may be understood as “flat” or “floating”, but this also belies a sublime ambiguity which is built into the image. The ambiguous nature of such hybrid images is made apparent (or evoked) in popular culture such as *anime*, which is clearly also a source genre for *Pureland*. *Anime* as popular phenomenon in the context of perspective or representation engenders the concept of “superflat” (Steinberg 2004: 449-471). *Anime* is also typically seen as a genre for children’s entertainment. As such it is often met with shock at its sometimes crude subject matter and depictions of violence and sexuality. The genre is thus not as naïve as one would suppose, and the subject matter is often intended for an adult audience. Its power as a genre is related to *otaku* culture, which lends it a cult-like status. Closely intertwined with *otaku* ideals is the urge to receive *anime* as a child would do, in order to be susceptible to potentially sublime experiences.

4.1 Edo, *ukiyo-e*, “superflat” and new media

The contemporary popular phenomenon of *anime* often refers in subject matter²⁹ to Japan’s spiritual and traditional past. But it has another link to Japan’s past of popular culture: the city and culture of Edo. In Japanese artist Tabaimo’s animated video installation, *Bathhouse-Gents* (fig. 14), *ukiyo-e* constitutes a link with contemporary *anime* in Japan. The presence of *ukiyo-e* prints in the installation, as well as formal strategies borrowed from these prints, such as dark

²⁹ Such as the renditions of pre-industrial Japan in *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, which are not necessarily representative of a historically specific periods in the country’s history.

outlining, situates the contemporary Japan that Tabaimo depicts within the context of nineteenth-century Japan. *Ukiyo-e* were popular prints, and most of them are associated with the capital of Japan, Edo as it was called at the time. These were not works of fine art, but were prints available to the trading classes. Although Japan always had a very closed policy towards the West, trade with the West increased at the time, and the Dutch East India Company had a small trading port at Nagasaki (Screech 2002: 8-11).

Ukiyo-e prints were the popular media of the time and many of the Impressionists in the West found them inspirational. They were associated with what the Japanese call *ukiyo*; the “floating world”, which was originally a Buddhist concept describing the transient world of earthly pleasures as opposed to the more permanent joys of the spirit and mind. It eventually came to be associated with the entertainment and culture of the urban merchant class, and the masses of the larger cities (Whitford 1977: 28-29). Tabaimo uses the Hokusai print (*Fuji in clear weather*) in the background to contextualise Japan’s contemporary society as an extension of the nineteenth century culture in Edo. The *ukiyo-e* prints connote a time of change, Westernisation and industrialisation for Japan, because the nineteenth century saw a significant influx of Europeans and their influence. Paradoxically, in contemporary Japan the old prints have come to connote the imaginary authentic non-Westernised Japan (Steinberg 2004: 449). The prints were not only a symbol of change, but a symbol of decline in traditional Japanese morals since they often depicted the not-so-innocent entertainment and past-times of the merchant classes (Steinberg 2004: 449-417). Edo also came to signify all that is Other or exotic to the West, but more importantly mirrors the post-modern present in its confrontation with rapid technological development and a change of values to Japanese society. (Steinberg 2004: 451).

In the non-West there has been ongoing ideological conflict between indigenous culture and Western technology. Thus, for countries such as Japan,

modernisation has been a constant struggle with technology as the internal Other (the West). Instead of rejecting the foreign culture in favour of indigenous culture, Japan has attempted to “establish a synthetic logic of Japanese universality” (Sato 2004: 342-343). Japan seems to have absorbed foreign (Western) technology and culture, in order to appropriate and control it. Western influences and indigenous culture are not always pitted in opposition, rather the foreign is assimilated until it seems indigenous.

Ukiyo-e prints often combine what resembles Western perspectival visual devices with flat elements. Most objects are outlined in a dark colour, making things appear two-dimensional. Steinberg (2004:450) says that contemporary artists, such as Takashi Murakami recognise this flatness (which he reinterprets as “superflat”) as a mobility of the gaze, a sensibility which contributes to and forms part of a “Japanese” worldview. This flatness links Japan’s past, present and future. One can relate its mobility to the concept of *śūnyatā* (the floating gaze) and the concept’s Buddhist background that applies to painting or the depiction of space. I believe that the flatness of *ukiyo-e* and *śūnyatā* translates into the post-modern culture of Japan in genres such as *anime*, although such genres may not resemble woodblock prints or older Japanese paintings.

4.2 Cuteness and violence

The sublime ambiguity underlying *Pureland* is manifest in the overly sweet appearance of the work. The digital sublime in the mass culture of *anime* is alluded to by sweet, cute, “idyllic”, or attractive images on the one hand and by images of violence, the grotesque, suffering and fear on the other. Both the sweet and the horrible extremes of the dialectic often refer to images of the imaginary past, such as the “idyllic” past or the horrible past of primitive violence and uncontrollable forces of nature. *Pureland* (fig. 1) displays an underlying tension between opposing concepts, thereby revealing the digital sublime. This

latent sublime can also be found in Hayao Miyazaki's animated film *Princess Mononoke*³⁰, in an interesting combination of cute and horrific characters.

It may not *only* be the case with *anime*, but in *anime* there is a tendency towards "cutification" just as there is a tendency towards exaggerated violence (Ngai 2005: 811-847). The tree spirits, characters from the film *Princess Mononoke*, are good examples of such cuteness. They are small and thus likened to children, do not talk, and skip along in the forest in a carefree manner. What is noticeable are their stylised features and according to Ngai (2005: 811-847) realism is purposely abandoned in order to make an object more cute. The smaller and less formally articulated an object is the cuter it becomes, indicating that cuteness is a form of "primitivism"³¹. Smallness and shapelessness suggest malleability. The object has to appear vulnerable to the consumer or viewer in order to excite the consumer or viewer's sadistic desires for mastery and control, as well as the desires for cuddling and affection. The tree spirits are "naked" like animals, small, white and very importantly depicted as vulnerable and innocent, yet magical. Their vulnerability to humans is emphasised in the film and one is very aware that cuteness and violence go hand-in-hand in this *anime*.

The tree spirits are an animistic embodiment of nature as a force. They are emphatically vulnerable, innocent and cute. On the other hand, nature is also embodied by more malevolent spirits such as the demon boar in the opening scene of the film (fig. 18). As the protagonist of the film (Prince Ashitaka) looks on from a watchtower, a beast which is at first obscured by the forest and a built wall, bursts from the trees. It seems to be a large boar covered in worm-like creatures similar to leeches or maggots. In short it seems like the decaying corpse of an animal beset by a malicious spirit.

³⁰ Hayao Miyazaki. 1997. *Princess Mononoke*. Studio Ghibli.

³¹ "Primitivism" in the sense that I invoke it is related to ideas of "the child" and "the savage" as being closer to nature, innocent, and in touch with a more primal way of seeing the world (Rhodes 1994:160).

They are both so astonished at the appearance of the demon that they do not move from the spot. The astonishment of the characters may be read as a representation of the experience of the sublime. The sublime experience fills the mind, there is no time for the spectator to react or think of anything else. For Kant (1790-99), the stimulus to a sublime experience lies in vast objects of Nature reflecting deities or godliness. The demon in the film represents the deity of Mother Nature; not as a nurturing mother, but an avenging beast. It is implied in the film that the demon was created when the creature was shot by humans and the bullet festered inside its body. The demon exists because humanity has created it in abusing the resources implicitly provided by benevolent Nature. The creature seems to have been a great spirit of the forest, hence its size. Other animals that symbolise natural deities are also embodied as large animals in the film such as the large wolves that raised Princess Mononoke herself.

The demon is covered by a mass of black worms. These creatures cover the boar and give a formless character to the beast, causing it to crawl like a spider or insect. The worms also have a life of their own, extending freely and loosening themselves from the actual body of the creature to reach out to its enemies. They are symptoms of the animal's curse, and human contact with them causes the person to be tainted by the same curse. They are supernatural and grotesque, the ultimate symbol of the natural world deviated from its proper order; it symbolises mutation, decay and malevolence. The formlessness of the beast can be read in terms of unrepresentability; the beast is terrifying in its indefinable essence. Where the blob-like faces of the little tree spirits rendered them cute, the boar has an *informe* quality.

The tree spirits and the boar demon seem to represent two sides of a dialectic that I interpret as evocative of the sublime. However, both are ambiguous in themselves. The tree spirits are not only cute, they have an implicit element of danger or violence in their cuteness. As supernatural, almost divine beings in the film, they are seen as dangerous, although their cuteness makes them seem

more vulnerable to humans than otherwise. The boar on the other hand, is a manifestation or depiction of that which is un-depictable; that which is impossible to comprehend or present and in fact does not present itself (Bryson 1993: 216-223). As a depiction of something horrible the boar reminds the viewer that there is something beyond the known representation, that which cannot be represented. Although the boar *can* be represented it is a sublime jolt to the senses in a similar manner that the avant-garde artists deliver in their subversion of the “solace of good [aesthetic] forms” (Costello 2000: 79). It is notable that the tree spirits look like toys. Cute objects are mostly manufactured for children, and *anime* is generally thought to be made for children. However, it is clear now that even the cuteness one finds in *anime* is not just cute, it implies something dangerous that is hidden by the cute appearance. *Pureland* with its pleasant and sweet appearance employs a similar masking effect.

4.3 Child-like immersion

Many diverse elements are assembled and “airbrushed” into one image in *Pureland*. The integration of the image and its plausibility as a depiction of a coherent space or even a virtual space, lies in the imagination of the viewer. Only in the imagination of the spectator can all of these disparate elements project a coherent “pictorial world”. This capacity of imagination is the same supposed capacity that children display to a greater degree than adults in watching fantasy films such as Miyazaki’s *anime*. It is also the same agency that *otaku* culture lays claim to,³² and it is what makes *anime* such an immersive genre. The imaginative agency of the viewer is what lends immersivity beyond the 3D glasses to the installation *Nirvana*, and ultimately extends immersivity to *Pureland*.

Kendall Walton (1990) discusses the imagination of the viewer as comparable to the imagination employed by children in their games. According to him representational works of art and their interaction with observers is comparable

³² Steinberg 2004: 449-471; Brehm 2002; and Looser 2002: 297-327.

to a child's interaction with what he calls "props" of the imagination (Walton 1990: 37). In other words, artworks can either lead us to imagine certain facts about the works themselves, or to imagine that they depict something. This relationship is similar to the interaction between a child and an object or toy used in play. "Props" as such are thus generators of fictional truths in this sense. *Anime* can be understood as just such a "prop". What is important however is that not all viewers will experience the same amount of immersion in the fantasy. For some, such as children who may be used to employing the imagination in games of make-believe, it might be easier to enter into a fictional world of interaction with the fantasy.

This ability to enter into a dialogue with a created environment, or to become immersed within it can also be compared to the focussed openness which Gumbrecht (2004) refers to as conducive to experiences of "presence" and epiphany. Whether or not children have the ability to become more immersed in the fantasy of *anime* than adults, is not really the issue here. The point is that the culture of *anime* among adult viewers is accompanied by the notion that some primal or child-like connection is to be made between the fantasy and the viewer. Such a connection or focus is supposed to lead to a revelatory experience, revealing some profound truth. It is my conviction though, that these potential epiphanies are revelations of the power of screen media and thus constitute the experience of the digital sublime.

Interaction with *anime* is often accompanied by nostalgia towards idealised childhood and a "primal" interaction with the depicted fantasy depicted and the screen medium itself. This idyllic urge is accompanied by the revelation of the digital sublime in an epiphany which is comparable to the mystic (negative) ecstasy evoked in Friedrich's empty landscapes.

Chapter 5: The idyllic in popular culture

Throughout this investigation reference has been made to the “sweet” or “pleasant” character of *Pureland*. This appearance has also been shown to mask an underlying (occult) sublime presence. The appealing appearance is sourced from popular culture. The smooth “airbrushed” appearance of the image, the pleasing colours and gentle shading, as well as the general tranquillity evoked by the strong horizontal orientation of the image gives the image the appearance of an advertisement or a popular film. It is slick.

It is notable that the pleasant appearance of images in popular culture is often reminiscent of “older” artistic or popular traditions. Romanticised images of natural scenery such as *Pureland* can be interpreted with reference to the wish image. The concept of the wish image was developed by Walter Benjamin in order to help explain and critique the cycle of novelty and obsolescence that shaped the material culture of the modern era (Barnett 2004: 46). The wish image is a phenomenon that seems to reconcile the dichotomy of Nature and culture, by envisioning emergent modernity through images of a lost past. Such images appropriate cultural material from a past so distant that it has been severed from contemporary reality in the popular imagination, and then applies it to a vision of an emergent utopian future. Wish images originate in the realm of entertainment, where an emergent technology has not yet been put to utilitarian function.

In *Pureland* (fig. 1) Mori envisages the future through images of ancient Japanese Buddhism, *ukiyo-e* printmaking techniques and Western landscape traditions. Cyberspace, the computer screen and virtual reality; along with new media (which I have shown to be evident in *Pureland* and *Nirvana*), are depicted through the familiar (in Japan) imagery of Buddhism and Western artistic traditions.

5.1 *Pureland* as Western *locus amoenus* and popular idyll

The cute alien figures (tunes) in *Pureland* (fig. 1) lead one back to popular culture. These figures are familiar in their general appeal and bland appearance. They are comparable to similar figures in popular culture not only in the West but also in the East, such as the tree spirits from Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

These spirits are shown to be sitting in a tree (fig. 15). They are smiling and their heads are inclined, as if they are singing or listening to a pleasant song. They look innocent. Their faces are stylised, lending them a primitive appearance. They are the embodiment of the living energy of the trees. It is clear that the forest and their relationship to it, and in fact everything about them is idealised. They are vulnerable and seem mostly passive. They do not work, but play skipping along, and curiously following humans (who intrude in the forest). Just as with the tree spirits (fig. 15) the aliens in *Pureland* are cute and stylised. They are almost “attributes” of the landscape’s pleasant character. It is customary for characters in *anime* or *manga* to have tiny animal or fantasy figures acting as their attributes. These figures are extensions of the character’s persona and usually endow the character with special or supernatural powers.

Both the tree spirits and the tunes (aliens) resemble toys in their colourful and mechanical appearance, adding to their seeming innocence and benevolence. Being toy-like they are also associated with children, who are sentimentally regarded as uncorrupted, and innocent to the point of representing a more primal or original strata of humanity by Romantics such as Runge. In his painting *The Hülßenbeck children*³³, he depicts children as untainted by experience and regarding the world afresh, which accords with the Romantic notion that children

³³ Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810). *The Hülßenbeck children* (1805-06). Oil on canvas, 130.4 x 140.5 cm. Hamburg: Kunsthalle (Rosenblum 1978: 52).

are mystical containers of nature's purest raw energies³⁴. Children are in contact with the unspoilt realm of nature, whereas adults are not. They represent the vigor and animal energy of natural growth, and Runge painted children in such a manner as to depict their vitality.(Rosenblum 1978: 50-54).

The idealisation of childhood or the primitive, or primal, has become interwoven with popular ideas of "beauty" or "pleasantness" in contemporary culture, but it has a long tradition that is very different from its popular character. In the nineteenth century the Orient was a great source of inspiration to painters such as Henri Matisse. It represented Otherness and exoticism, but in an idealised light. The Orient that Matisse painted is not a real place; it is an idealised combination of Seville, Morocco and even the *demi-monde* in Nice (Cafritz et al. 1989: 243). It represents a supposed "natural" or primitive lifestyle that is far from realistically "primitive", and draws instead on the pastoral tradition and the idealisation of Arcadia in Virgil's poetry. This notion of the idyllic, pastoral or primitive became almost formulaic in that certain conventions were ascribed to it. It was an ideal and fictional existence that artists could recreate, and those such as Matisse and Gauguin travelled to exotic lands to attempt to find the real Arcadia (Flam 1973: 56-64).

The mood evoked by Virgil's pastoral poetry can be traced back to what Lawrence Gowing (1989: 183-188) calls the first truly pastoral painting of the West; Giorgione's *Concert champêtre*³⁵. Gowing (1989: 198) traces this tradition in the development of landscape painting. One of the most well-known artists who pioneered these conventions in landscape painting is Claude Lorrain. The work of this artist and of Rococo *fêtes galantes* painters such as Watteau set the scene for decorative landscape art and also for the Romantic movement's realism. On the other hand, the idyllic tradition influenced *popular* culture such as

³⁴ The *Songs of innocence and experience* (1795) by William Blake is a well-known source affirming the Romantic belief that children are somehow untainted by life-experience and as such innocent and guileless.

³⁵ Giorgione (1477/78–1510) or Titian (1488-1576). *Concert champêtre*, 1510. Oil on canvas 109 x 137 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre (Cafritz et al. 1988: 29).

picturesque landscape painting which, as a “tourist landscape”, can be regarded as the forerunner of landscapes in contemporary popular culture that are idealised or idyllic in tone (Andrews 1999: 129-149).

In *The music* (fig. 16), Matisse depicts women lazing on what seems to be grass. They are playing various musical instruments. In Claude Lorrain’s *Landscape with rural dance* (fig. 17) human figures are dancing, as indicated by the title, while in *Pureland* the “tunes” are playing musical instruments, some of which resemble flutes and lutes. The flute is also depicted in Matisse’s painting. In Virgil’s *Eclogues*, music constitutes a central aspect of life in Arcadia,³⁶ which was known as shepherds’ country, and the home of the god Pan (who was the god of herdsmen and the inventor of the syrinx or pan-pipe). Virgil’s shepherds love poetry and song and spend their days making music and relaxing in the pleasant natural environment (Snell 1963: 1-9).

Matisse saw art as ideally an escape, an armchair that offers solace to the soul. Such an escape mirrors the escapist urge informing the pastoral tradition. Arcadia, as Virgil wrote about it, was a place or state of natural harmony that was the idyllic primitive origin and destination of humankind. Artists such as Matisse travelled to Morocco to search for an existing place that could be such a paradise, but which in reality was not (Flam 1973: 56-64).

Pureland and *Landscape with rural dance* share other pastoral motifs apart from music and musical instruments. The soft glowing light of morning or sunrise lends a golden “aura” to both. The small temple structure reflected on the surface of the “water” in *Pureland* seems comparable to the city and the stream in the

³⁶The pastoral poems were based on an imaginary place based very loosely by Virgil on the real Arcadia situated in Greece (Snell 1963: 1-9). However, the Arcadia Virgil created does not refer to the actual place Arcadia, but rather to *an idealised rural paradise* where human beings interact with the gods (much as they did in Ovid’s Golden Age). This place is characterised by tender feeling. The shepherds lack the crudeness of the peasant life, and spend more time playing the flute and relaxing in the evening shade than on labouring for their daily bread. The Arcadian myth later inspired the pastoral landscape painting tradition. The motif of music is a particularly important feature, since Virgil’s shepherds were known for their singing and music.

background of Lorrain's painting. The presence of the city indicates the escapist function of the countryside in the pastoral tradition. Mori's temple combines the motifs of architecture and water as found in Lorrain's painting, but in the context of *Pureland* takes on a connotation of solitude within nature. This could also be an escape from the industry and technology in the city, but Mori only displaces technology onto a "natural" setting, namely the bare essentialist landscape.

In both Lorrain's and Matisse's paintings people are shown in physical contact with Nature. They are dancing on the ground and walking through the countryside or sitting on green grass. In Mori's image, however, all the figures float above the landscape and have no contact with physical earth. *Pureland* does not seem to depict the same intimate communion with Nature that Lorrain and Matisse's paintings do. Why would Mori not depict herself strolling through the countryside? Although she does this in other artworks, *Pureland* seems to involve something more than a pastoral idyllic communion with the natural world and deities, whether from Greek, Roman or Buddhist mythology. *Pureland* does not depict the nostalgia of the idyllic landscape as Lorrain formalised it. *Pureland* rather evokes a yearning for a hybrid of imagined or mythical pasts, but also for myths of the future such as that of utopia. This urge draws upon a long tradition in which the idyllic tradition becomes sentimental popular culture (through the picturesque tourist landscapes) depicting natural scenery.

Elements such as the aliens, recognisable as well-known images in the mass culture of the nineteen-nineties, indicate that Mori involves popular discourse in her image. The display of *Pureland* as a cibachrome print behind glass (among other methods of display) mimics a technique that is used to manufacture billboards and advertising posters or "screens". The pleasant appearance of the idyllic tradition has been watered-down and filtered into mass-culture and the pleasant appearance of the many "natural" environments depicted. *Pureland* refers to this "popular idyllic" to a greater extent than to the pastoral paintings of

Lorrain, because what Mori depicts is an enlightenment facilitated to all human beings through technology.

5.2 The myth of the “return to Nature”

The pastoral or idyllic landscape is not the only affirmative tradition informing popular idealised landscape images. Apart from contemporary myths, the idyllic in popular culture draws on other Greek and Roman myths such as the Golden Age and Utopia. All of these have conflated into a convoluted myth of the “return to Nature” or “Mother Nature” (*Gaia*). The myth is evident in films such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997). In this film there are not only many animistic references to the spirits of plants and animals, but in addition the plot of the film revolves around the theme of the human attempt to destroy the forest for industrial gain. The myth is not only perpetuated in visual culture, but also in New Age revivals of religions, cooking practices, furniture arrangement and most aspects of post-modern lifestyles.³⁷

5.2.1 Arcadia and the Golden Age

Virgil’s Arcadian myth is specifically linked to the idyllic landscape, but the Arcadian myth also relates to the myth of the Golden Age. The myth of the Golden Age originated in Greek mythology, in the writings of Ovid and Hesiod. According to Ovid there are four Ages of the world, classified by the metals of gold, silver, bronze and iron (Parada 2005: 2). The Ages can be seen as characterising the moral or spiritual qualities of human society at the time, which degenerate as time progresses. Thus the first Age (the Golden Age) is characterised as a time of peace, justice, simplicity and happiness and the succeeding Ages are increasingly characterised by hate, greed, war and injustice. In this context, material and technological progress is seen as negative,

³⁷ According to Birringer (1983: 138), there is an entire culture of such developments, a search for a lost centre or origin. This reflects on the need of our secular culture to find new forms of “constructive spirituality”.

as a cause or symptom of decline. The Golden Age is characterised by innocence, and thus associated with childhood. It is seen as a lost paradise where the beauty of the natural world is sacred and the world is bewitched through humans having intercourse with gods (Parada 2005: 8).

5.2.2 Utopia

Thomas More wrote about utopia as an ideal that may be achieved through humans attaining harmony in their relationships with fellow creatures and with Nature itself (Adams 1975: 96). This perfect state comes about through technological progress, but is not detrimental to humanity's relationship with Nature. In fact, humanity is reconciled with the original perfect past, the Garden of Eden. There are strands of More's vision of utopia that are visible in contemporary visual culture, such as *anime* and in art, since it reconciles the dichotomy between culture and Nature. Mori's image suggests such a techno-harmony between what is artificial and Natural.

5.3 Idyllic and mystic

I have now clarified the "pleasantness" of *Pureland* in relation to Western landscape painting traditions with an affirmative character. It is important to note that the image is assembled from diverse source material, contributing and resulting in many contradictions in meaning. I will thus briefly outline the two basic strands of landscape painting tradition which run contrary to each other and are forced to coexist in *Pureland*; the idyllic and mystic landscape traditions.

The environment evoked in *Pureland* consists of the basic landscape elements of a horizon dividing the image into two planes; one on top and the other below. Without its figures and objects, the landscape has a mystic tone due to its featurelessness. I have already mentioned its affinity in this regard to Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* (fig. 4). The temple structure in the background to my Western

eye seems reminiscent of Claudian idyllic paintings. Natural water sources and cities are often present in his pastoral paintings. The reflection of Mori's temple (which corresponds to the usual city in the Claudian background) in the "water" (which is usually in the Claudian middle-ground) recalls the pacific mood of Claude's pastoral paintings. The central human figure and the plastic lotus flower at her feet have connotations of the cultic, ritual, or of deities. The combination is reminiscent of the Aurora figure in Runge's *Small Morning*, which is usually interpreted from a romantic stance.³⁸ Nature is accordingly portrayed in affirmative imagery, as beautiful, noble, pure and characterising of innocence and beauty; a manifestation of God's power.

Although Friedrich's work itself is understood by Rampley (2000: 73-96) as pastoral or idyllic, the mystic tradition that it so clearly embraces runs fundamentally contrary to affirmative traditions such as the idyllic, and especially strands of it remaining in contemporary popular culture. The mystic tradition is characterised by a negative stance, and the artworks that constitute this tradition are not "easy" or "comfortable" to behold or understand. This is why the mystic tradition can be understood as a forerunner of the avant-garde.³⁹ The "tunes" (Weintraub 2003: 316) are figures that seem to be composite creations referring to such diverse figures as the *putto*, little Rubens-like "angels", extra-terrestrials as depicted in nineteen-nineties popular culture (such as *The X-files*) and even spirits of nature or deity. They also resemble *anime* characters in their "cute", bland appearance (Ngai 2005). It is clear that they evoke the idyllic nuances found in popular culture. The various idyllic and mystic strands of meaning and

³⁸ Rudolf Bisanz (1970) gives a detailed discussion of Runge's work in his book *German Romanticism and Philip Otto Runge*. The mystic and romantic strands that can be discerned in his work are also discussed by Rosenblum (1978: 47-55). He says that the romantic artist sought ways in which to separate spirituality from the trappings of religious practice, and thus the spiritual was sought and found in nature.

³⁹ Lyotard (1984: 36-43) does not spell this out, but his reading of non-representational art such as Barnett Newman's can be extended to the work of Mark Rothko and even perhaps Friedrich's. This is not an uncomplicated argument to propose, and whether it is possible to sustain is debatable. I would like to point out the affinity between Lyotard's theories and Friedrich's *Monk by the sea*.

experience are merged into a smooth whole in *Pureland*, although mystic strands are not as apparent in the appearance of the image.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Hybridity

Pureland is an image composited from diverse visual sources such as the self-portrait image of Mori herself, and the tiny computer-generated “aliens”. The manner in which the image (and video installation *Nirvana*) was put together may be understood in accordance with Lev Manovich’s (2001: 136-160) term “compositing”. This is a digital process by means of which different visual (or video) images can together be used to create a fictive environment. In other words, a space can be constructed from disparate elements which do not co-occur in any real space. Thus, in Mori’s *Pureland* a landscape photograph of the Dead Sea is the “backdrop” or fundamental layer. “On top of” this, various layers of objects such as the “aliens” and the lotus flower are added to appear as if they occupy the “space” of the landscape. The auratic glow is the “glue” that melds the layers into a depiction of a smooth uniform “space”, and in this sense it performs in much the same way as the representational “field” discussed in section 3.2.

The process of compositing also implies that all the elements are put together seamlessly, and are made to appear coherent. Manovich (2001: 141-145) compares compositing to the older technique of montage, where elements would appear incongruent and it would be obvious to the observer that elements do not form a coherent whole. Montage aims to create visual, stylistic, semantic and emotional dissonance between elements. Compositing, on the other hand aims to blend such elements into a seamless whole. One can clearly see that the elements in *Pureland* are gelled into a smooth unity. However, the disparate contexts of the image fragments do not necessarily blend into a conceptual unity. The aim of this study has been to elucidate, separate and extricate the strands of origin, meaning and “presence” in *Pureland* in order to fathom their ideological significance and power.

Pureland can be said to be a hybrid image, since it is formally composited of elements that were taken from diverse sources. It is also a conceptual hybrid, since each of the elements contributes a different set of implications for the experience of the observer. I have shown that the apparent conceptual discursive visual properties of the image, has other contrary interpretations, such as its new media quality⁴⁰, and its pleasant appearance rooted in popular culture. On the other hand the digital sublime (manifest in a paradoxically mystic landscape character) is an underlying presence that may reveal itself sporadically.

In *The wake of imagination* Richard Kearney (1988: 1-33) says that the post-modern artist is like a *bricoleur*, collecting fragments of meaning and images that were not created by him-or herself, but are instead sourced from diverse media such as digital databases and analogue media. The artist puts these images together in a reinterpretation, creating or evoking diverse combinations of meaning. Such a hybrid is thus more than the sum of its parts. Montage and collage on the other hand, are modern processes that are also constructed from unrelated visual material and fragments. Unlike the composite image, both of the former emphasise rather than conceal the dissension between the diverse source materials used. This is because modern works of art aimed ultimately to exist outside the bourgeois institutions of art. The problem with “autonomous” art in bourgeois society is that its distance from the “praxis of life” can lead to it having an affirmative function instead of emphasising the negative elements in society that need to be revised. When I refer to the Abstract Expressionist movement as creating avant-garde art, it is because their art *opposes* the bourgeois practice of having art reflect joy, truth and solidarity. Peter Bürger (1984: 50-51) argues that art *does* on the other hand have to strive towards autonomy from the praxis of life in order to deliver critique on reality. Thus the

⁴⁰ Victor Burgin (1991: 14-15) argues that electronic and digital media are altering perception of social space, in so far as spaces once perceived as segregated now overlap, and older spaces such as that of industrial capitalism are now imploding or “infolding” upon themselves. This theory of space does not have to be restricted to socio-political theory but can be applied to the representation of space in visual culture and art.

avant-garde tendencies in art, as I have referred to these in the work of Friedrich, Klein and Rothko, should be understood as oppositional towards affirmative tendencies in both art and popular culture. The avant-garde artwork aims to be oppositional, and not to serve as entertainment for the viewer. Montage and collage function accordingly as a disruption of the internal unity of the artwork, displaying the ruptured character of meaning in the modern world in a way that is meant to shock the observer. In a way, montage and collage display less than the sum of its parts, in a negation of coherence and meaning (Adorno 1970: 154-156).

An important aspect of montage, as Walter Benjamin understood it, is that much of the eventual “meaning” which arises (for even the negation of meaning is concerned with meaning) lies in the observer’s experience of the work (Gumbrecht & Marrinan 2003: 44-50). This is comparable to the generation of meaning in the post-modern experience of hypertext. The path of a user can never be replicated or said to generate the exact meaning a second or third time, since hypertext is followed through links, and the path one user follows does not resemble the path another user will choose. Meaning arises only as a coherent whole within the experience of the user, since it is generated in the combination and sequence of texts accessed by the user (Ryan 2001).

The technique of using and combining different visual sources in creating a work of art is not merely a modern or post-modern development. Works of visual art have been known to refer to other works of art and literary texts such as the Bible since antiquity, and this was the core focus of iconology. From an art historical perspective it is also a common practice to attempt the interpretation of an artwork by investigating the artist’s life for example, and his or her presumed “influences”, in order to establish a framework for better understanding the work (Baxandall 1985: 105-137).⁴¹ The composited image is composed directly from

⁴¹ According to reports, Donat de Chapeaurouge’s book *Wandel und Konstanz in der Bedeutung entlehnter Motive* (1974) is an authoritative source on the ontology of “borrowed” or derivative images in medieval and early modern art.

diverse sources such as visual databanks, whereas the Renaissance artist would paint or draw from source material in a manner copying or mimicking the material. The composited image *is* the source material, blended and smoothed (“airbrushed”) into a seemingly coherent image. Mieke Bal (1994: 49-52) discusses the post-modern concept of intertextuality with reference to Derrida’s theory of “dissemination”. She contrasts iconographic precedent with the former, saying that an artist would emulate historical works of art and thus declare allegiance and debt to the work of a predecessor.

On the other hand, with regard to intertextuality, the artist can in turn influence the interpretation of the historical source. The meaning of a specific motif may then also be borrowed. Even if this meaning is altered or subverted, it will still carry the trace of the other. The “text” from which the motif or form is borrowed is also implied in the intertextual reference. Iconographic analysis, by contrast, usually avoids making statements about the meaning of borrowed motifs. Through intertextuality Mori appropriates the “aliens” from popular culture and she evokes the association their appearance has with popular culture.

Pureland is a unique amalgam, or hybrid (offspring) of the many popular and artistic traditions applied as sources in its construction. I have attempted to show that the image uses the immersive techniques of the computer and television screen to allow the user to “enter” the virtual space of the image. Elements of popular culture such as the smooth pink appearance, and the “cute” figures of the “aliens” entice the viewer and create a popular idyllic appearance, while engaging the nostalgic sentiments that the idyllic and exotic Japanese (relating to *ukiyo-e* and *anime*) imagery engender. On the other hand the image is not quite sentimental pop, it is taut and rigid in its pleasantness. Hidden from view is the potential of its sublime experience; the “sudden” moment of aesthetic “presence” which is the manifestation of the digital sublime. The digital sublime is not only lurking behind the appearance of *Pureland*, but is surprisingly embedded within digital mass culture, even if concealed behind an idyllic appearance or evoked by

grotesque images, as is often done in the Japanese genre of *anime*. In this manner, *Pureland* is also a hybrid image attempting to reconcile or unite the conflicting traditions of idyllic and mystic landscape representation, either concealing or revealing the digital sublime.

Abstract

The major image investigated in this study, is a cibachrome print entitled *Pureland* by Japanese artist Mariko Mori. The print is a still image from one of her 3D installations titled *Nirvana*. Throughout the text I refer to *Pureland* not as a pure image but as one appearing in different media, since the varied visual manifestations and reproductions of the image contribute to diverse aspects of the argument. The image is found in calendars and books, is exhibited as a large print and certain of Mori's prints are even exhibited on lightboxes. This renders the prints a glowing computer or television screen quality, and suggests the notion of an advertising billboard. The "screen" qualities of the image are investigated throughout.

The appearance of the image is pleasant, pink, even pretty, and this "eye-candy" could allude to the affirmative character of mass media images describing beautiful natural scenery. Sentimental images appear in Japanese *manga* and *anime*, but also in Western popular media such as Hollywood films. Furthermore *Pureland* seems reminiscent of landscape traditions that relate to idyllic yearning or nostalgia. This leads to the following question: is the pastoral tradition in its established conventions pertinent to the idyllic tendencies in mass media?

What seems problematic in my view is that it appears as if something is omitted from the image on account of its pleasing character. This may indicate that what is *not depicted* (something extremely un-pleasant?) may also be relevant. This "un-pleasant" is investigated as a possible allusion to the digital sublime lurking

beneath the smooth appearance of the image, only to manifest in brief moments of “suddenness”.

The sublime is discussed in the context of the mystic landscape tradition and especially the work of artists such as Caspar David Friedrich in the mystic tradition, and, as it develops into the Abstract Expressionist movement in the work of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and even the avant-garde art of Yves Klein. The mystic tradition is based on a negative stance grounded in the notion of *kenosis*, which is an emptying out resulting in transcendence. This tradition is fundamentally opposed to affirmative (idyllic) tendencies in both art and popular culture. The co-existence of the conflicting idyllic and mystic strands in the image is investigated throughout as an uneasy relationship which may result in a rupturing of the smooth pleasant appearance of the image, revealing the digital sublime.

The “digital sublime” is derived from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s understanding of the sublime. It may manifest in cyberspace, virtual reality and other digital media that evoke virtual space, through seeming vastness and threatening character. Understanding the operations of viewing and representation implied by the computer and television screen is thus important in grasping the dynamic of the digital sublime. Do representations of space on the screen differ from perspectival representations of space and landscape in the fixed images of Western painting traditions? On the screen overlay and geometric principles are combined, urging the observer to penetrate and explore the layers, virtually or imaginatively entering the layered virtual environment. The notion of virtual depth as non-illusory depth may be comparable to Japanese viewing traditions and the diverse concepts of *śūnyatā* and “superflat”. The application of overlay and *śūnyatā* to contemporary painting is investigated in chapter three.

I suspect that *Pureland* is a hybrid image, not only digitally composited from existing visual material, but also comprised of traces of disparate visual traditions and conventions. This is discussed in conclusion.

Key terms

- Sublime
- Idyllic
- Mystic
- *Anime/manga*
- Screen
- Presence
- Hybridity
- Digital sublime
- Unpresentable

Opsomming

Die voorstel van die sublieme: wisselwerking tussen ruimtelike voorstelling in nuwe media en idilliese en mistiese tradisies in die skilderkuns.

Die belangrikste visuele beeld wat in hierdie studie ondersoek word, is 'n druk met die titel *Pureland*, deur die Japanese kunstenaar Mariko Mori. Die print is 'n stil-beeld uit een van haar drie-dimensionele video-installasies getiteld *Nirvana*. Deurgaans verwys ek na *Pureland* as die teendeel van 'n suiwer visuele beeld, omdat dit in verskillende media gereproduseer word. Hierdie kwaliteit van die beeld dra by tot diverse aspekte van my argument. Die afbeelding verskyn in kalenders, boeke, word uitgestal as 'n groot afdruk en sommige van Mori se drukke word selfs op ligkaste uitgestal. Dit verleen 'n gloeiende rekenaar- of televisieskerm kwaliteit aan die afdrucke, en herrinner ook aan advertensieborde. Die "skermkwaliteite" van *Pureland* word deurgaans ondersoek.

Die voorkoms van die beeld is aanloklik, en selfs mooi, en hierdie “eye-candy” kwaliteit kan verwys na die afirmatiewe aard van massa media beelde wat pragtige natuurtonele beskryf. Sentimentele beelde kom voor in Japanese *manga* en *anime*, maar ook in Westerse populêre media soos Hollywood films. *Pureland* herrinner aan landskap tradisies wat idilliese verlange of nostalgie voortbring. Dit lei na die volgende vraag: het die landskap konvensies van die pastorale tradisies betrekking op idilliese tendense in die massa media?

Wat volgens my problematies is, is dat die aanloklikeid van die beeld die vraag laat ontstaan of iets doelbewus weggelaat is uit die beeld. Dit mag aandui dat wat nie afgebeeld is nie (iets baie afstootlik) ook relevant is tot die beeld. Hierdie “afstootlike” word ondersoek as moontlike verwysing na die digitale sublieme, wat versteek is onder die gladde voorkoms van die beeld, maar wat oombliklik kan verskyn.

Die sublieme word bespreek in die konteks van die mistiese landskaptradisie en veral in die werke van kunstenaars soos Caspar David Friedrich en van Abstrakte Ekspressioniste soos Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman en selfs in die avant-garde kuns van Yves Klein. Die mistiese tradisie is gegrond op ‘n negatiewe uitkyk en die konsep *kenosis*, wat verwys na ‘n ontleding of leegmaking wat uitloop op transendering. Hierdie tradisie is fundamenteel gekant teen die afirmatiewe neigings in populêre kultuur en in kuns. Die gelyktydige bestaan van die onversoenbare idilliese en mistiese betekenis in die beeld word ondersoek as ‘n ongemaklike verhouding wat kan uitloop op ‘n skeuring van die gladde voorkoms van die beeld, om sodoende die digitale sublieme te openbaar.

Die “digital-sublieme” word geïnterpreteer na aanleiding van Jean-Francois Lyotard se teorie van die sublieme. Dit mag voorkom of verskyn in die kuberruim, virtuele realiteit en ander digitale media wat virtuele ruimte skep, deur middel van

die idee van oneindige ruimte of 'n dreigende karakter. Die meganismes van kyk en voorstelling wat deur die rekenaar- en televisieskerm geskep en onderhou word, dra dus by tot 'n sinvolle begrip van die werking van die digital-sublieme. Die vraag word gevra: Verskil die ruimtevoorstelling op die skerm van die perspektiewiese voorstelling van ruimte en die landskap in die Westerse landskapskilder tradisies? Op die skerm word die gebruik van lae oormekaar ("overlay") en geometriese beginsels gekombineer, wat die toeskouer aanmoedig om die lae te penetreer en te verken deur virtueel en in die verbeelding die ruimte binne te tree. Die idee van virtuele diepte as nie-illusionêre diepte mag vergelykbaar wees met Japanese voorstellings- en betragtingstradisies en die diverse konsepte van *śūnyatā* en "superflat". Die toepassing van "overlay" en *śūnyatā* op kontemporêre skilderkuns word ondersoek.

Ek is van mening dat *Pureland* 'n hibriede beeld is, wat digitaal saamgestel ("composited") is, maar wat ook trekke weerspieël van uiteenlopende visuele tradisies en konvensies. Hierdie aspek word ter slotte ondersoek.

Sleutelterme

- Sublieme
- Idilliese
- Mistiese
- *Anime/manga*
- Skerm
- "Presence"
- Hibriditeit
- Digitaal-sublieme
- "Unpresentable"

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Representing the sublime: interactions between spatial representations in new media and idyllic and mystic traditions in painting

Dissertation towards completion of MA (Fine Art) degree at the University of
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Volume II: Visual material

Landi Raubenheimer

List of Illustrations

1. Mariko Mori (1967-), *Pureland* (1997-98). Glass with photo interlayer, edition of three. Five panels of 305 x 610 x 2.2 cm each. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Weintraub 2003: 315).
2. Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), *Fuji in clear weather* (1823-29). Woodblock print, 26.1 x 37.6 cm. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum. (Hillier 1954: 35).
3. Stills from *Spirited Away* (2001). Directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Produced by Studio Ghibli.
4. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), *Monk by the sea* (1809-10). Oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm. Berlin: National Gallerie (Koerner 1990: 168).
5. Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *Blue, green and brown* (1951). Oil on canvas. Upperville: collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon (van de Vall 1995: 70).
6. Yves Klein (1928-1962). *IKB 181* (1956). Dry pigment in synthetic resin stuck to linen cloth, 76 x 54 cm. Madrid: Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
<http://www.the-exit.net/plaza/yves-klein.de>
7. James Turrell (1943-). *Spread* (2003). Fluorescent and neon light installation. Henry Art Gallery, Seattle. Photo by Dean Welshman.
<http://www.preview-art.com/features/turrell.html>
8. Mariko Mori(1967-), *Nirvana* (1997). 3 D video installation.
9. Mariko Mori(1967-), *Nirvana* (1997). 3 D video installation.

10. Mariko Mori (1967-), *Nirvana* (1997). 3 D video installation.
11. Yves Klein (1928-1962). Installation shot of retrospective exhibition entitled *Yves Klein* at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 17 September 2004 – 9 January 2005.
<http://www.the-exit.net/plaza/yves-klein.de>
12. James Turrell (1943-), *Unseen Blue* (2002). Corrugated steel-clad structure with aperture in the ceiling and mahogany seating for thirty people, 20 x 23 x 23 m. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, parking lot: The Mattress Factory.
<http://www.mattress.org/catalogue/02/turrell/skyspace.html>
13. Landi Raubenheimer (1981-). *The floating world* (2005). Oil on canvas, approx 2 x 2m. Private collection (Courtesy of artist).
14. Tabaimo (1975-), *Japanese Bathhouse-Gents* (2003). Lithograph on Japanese paper, edition of 5, 42 x 60 cm each. Tokyo: Hiromi Yoshii.
<http://www.re-title.com/artists/tabaimo-.asp>
15. Still of tree spirits from *Princess Mononoke* (1997), directed by Hayao Miyazaki.
16. Henri Matisse (1869-1954) *The Music* (1910). Oil on canvas, 260 x 389 cm. St. Petersburg, Russia: State Hermitage Museum (Gowing 1979: 104).
17. Claude Lorrain (1604-1682), *Landscape with rural dance* (1640-41). Oil on canvas, 114 x 147 cm. Bedland Estate: Woburn Abbey. (Andrews 1999: 98, 50).
18. Demon sequence. Video clip from *Princess Mononoke* (1997), directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

19. Tree spirit sequence. Video clip from *Princess Mononoke* (1997), directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

Films and digital material

Mamoru Oshii. *Ghost in the shell*. 1995. Masamune Shirow/Kodansha/Bandai visual/Manga Entertainment. Production I.G.

Mamoru Oshii. *Ghost in the shell II Innocence*. 2003. Production I.G.

Sakaguchi, H & Sakakibara, M. *The Animatrix*. 2001. Warner Bros.

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Hayao Miyazaki. *Spirited Away*. 2001. Studio Ghibli.

Note to the reader

This dissertation consists of two volumes: a written dissertation accompanied by a volume of visual material. In the latter volume images are grouped into clusters in order to facilitate comparison. This eases the reading process as the reader does not have to page back-and-forth in order to follow the arguments visually

Some of the visual material consists of video clips to be viewed on a computer. The CD is included in an envelope on the last page of this volume. It may be necessary to install viewing programmes and codecs in order to view the video clips. These installation files are provided on the CD which contains the video clips. The clips should be viewed on a computer with the following minimum requirements:

Pentium 3 processor, at least 128mb Ram, a video card with 32mb Ram and at least Windows '95. Equivalent Mackintosh computer.



Fig. 1

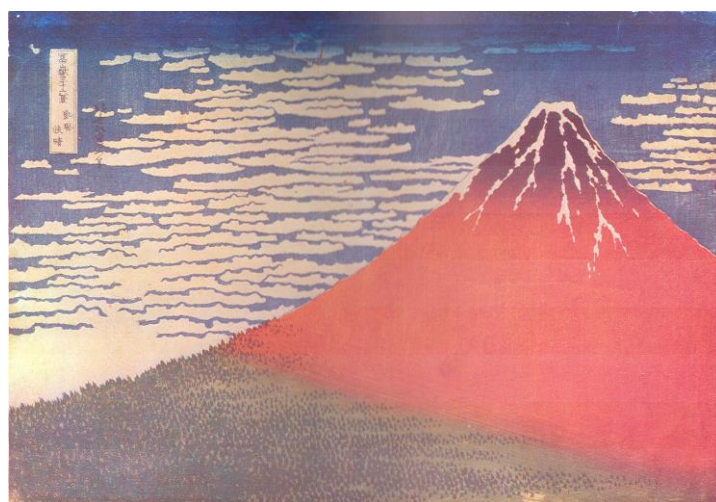


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 1



Fig. 4

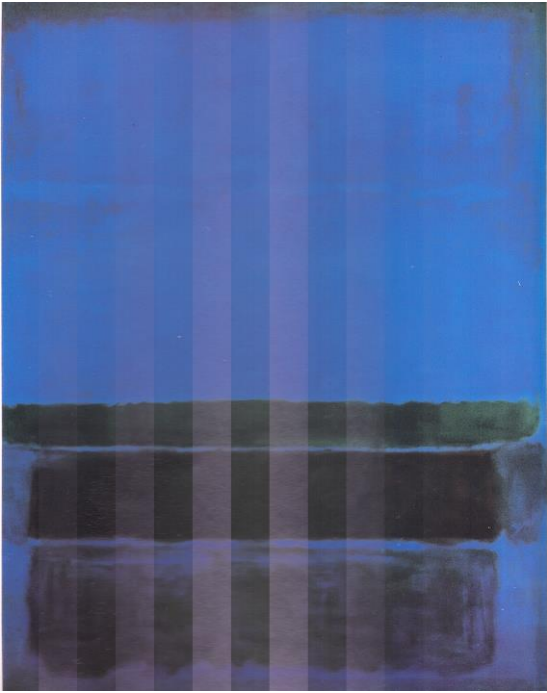


Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 13

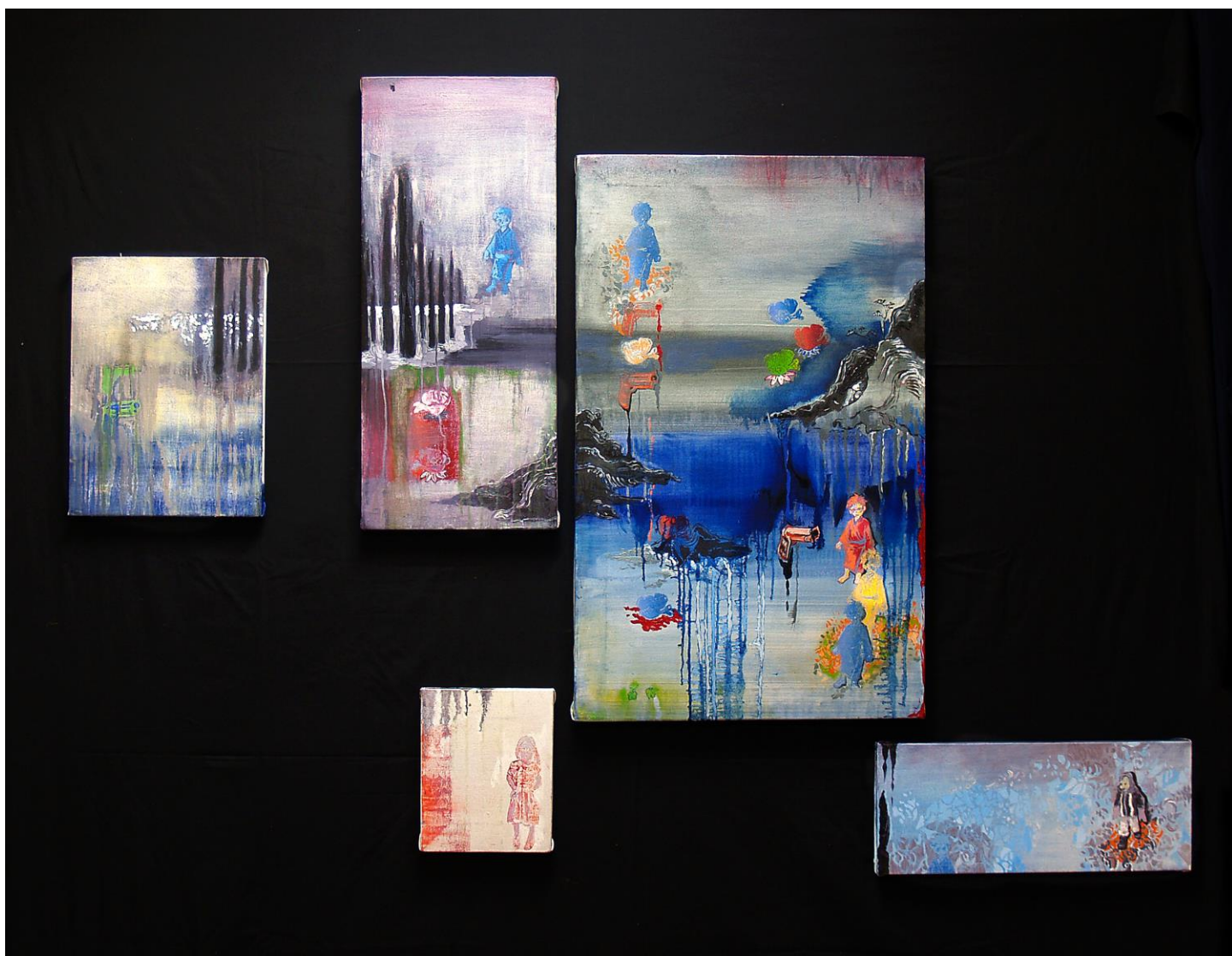


Fig. 13



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 1



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

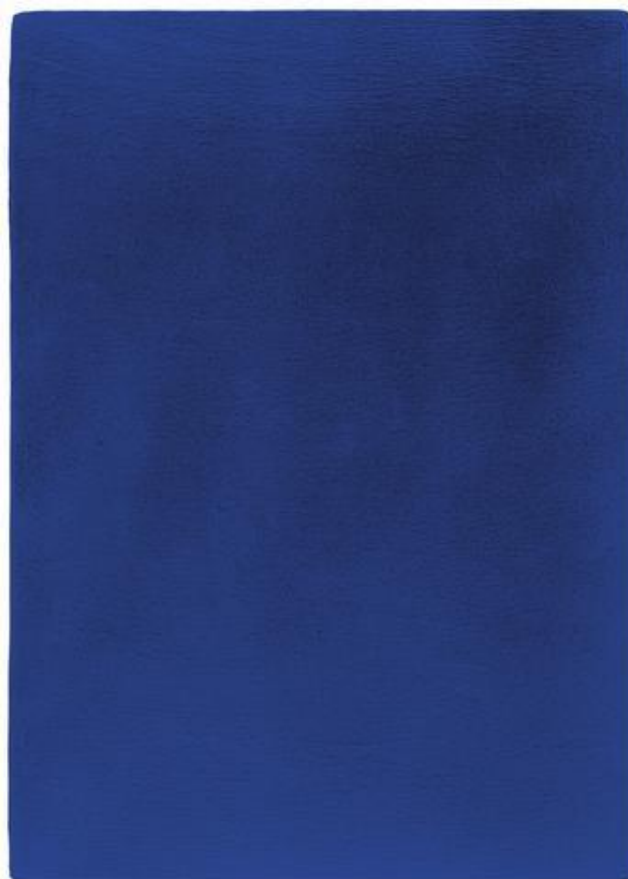


Fig. 6



Fig. 13



Fig. 3

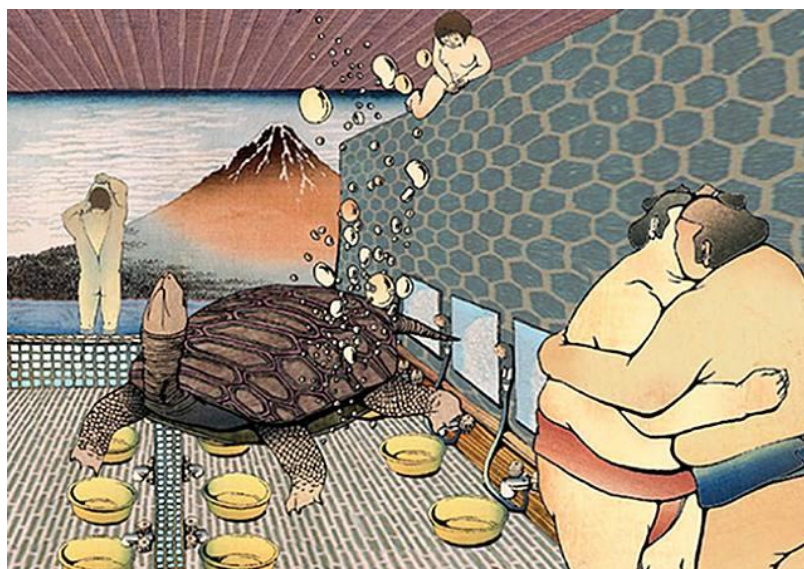


Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 1



Fig. 17

