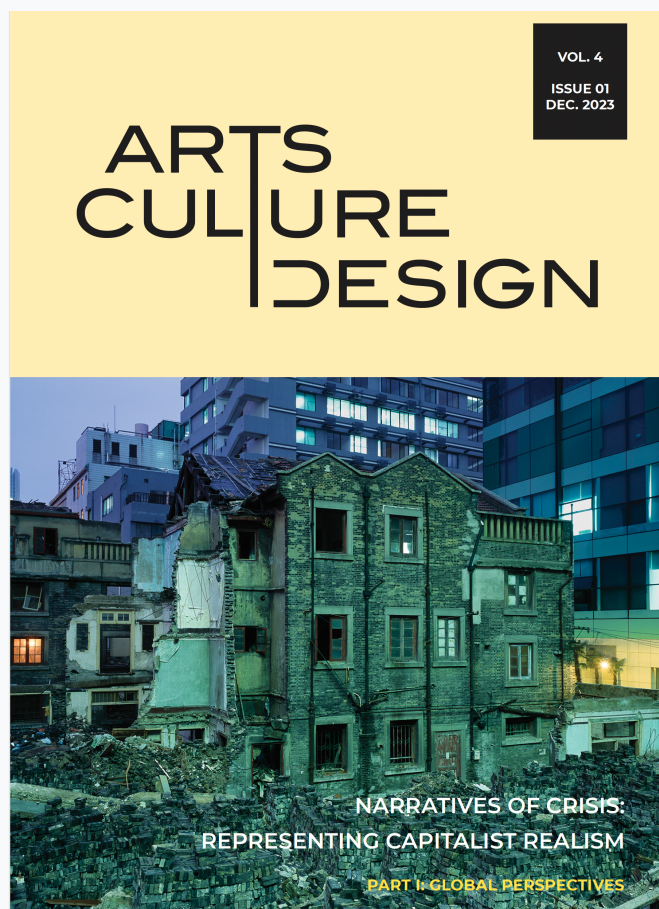


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Narratives of Crisis: Representing Capitalist Realism



### 'A SHABY SUBLIMITY": REPRESENTING THE CAPITALIST SUBLIME

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# “A SHABY SUBLIMITY”: REPRESENTING THE CAPITALIST SUBLIME

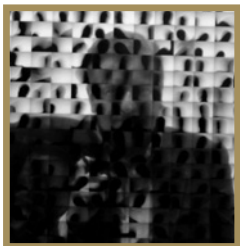
**John Stathatos**  
Independent

## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

Capitalist Realism  
Brexit  
Photography  
Landscape

This visual essay explores the concept of the "Capitalist Sublime," analyzing how contemporary imagery seeks to invoke feelings of awe and power in relation to capitalism. Drawing from Longinus and Edmund Burke's definitions of the sublime, the essay delves into the allure of power and overwhelming awe that capitalism attempts to evoke through its imagery. Examples range from high-art sculptures like Jeff Koons' "New Hoover Celebrity IV" to vast cityscapes and monumental architecture, such as the Atlantis hotel in Dubai and aircraft carriers. The essay further examines the works of photographer Edward Burtynsky, whose large-scale images of industrial landscapes align with the tradition of the sublime while also reflecting the triumph of capitalism. Advertisements, luxury goods, and celebrity endorsements are scrutinized for their attempts to capture the sublime in promoting brands and consumerism. Ultimately, the essay reflects on how these attempts at the capitalist sublime may often veer into the ridiculous, underscoring the contrast between their intention and true sublimity.



**JOHN STATHATOS** is a photographer, writer and researcher. His personal work has been shown in numerous European exhibition venues. The survey exhibition *Image & Icon: The New Greek Photography, 1975-1995* which he curated for the Greek Ministry of Culture and the accompanying 300-page catalogue which accompanied it represented the first in-depth critical study of contemporary Greek photography. In 2002 he founded the Photographic Encounters, first held on the island of Kythera and subsequently in Chania, Crete, which he now organises in tandem with Penelope Petsini and Yiorgos Anastasakis. His publications include *The Invention of Landscape: Greek Landscape and Greek Photography, 1870-1995* (Camera Obscura, 1996); *Maria Chrousachi* (National Library, 2000); The photographs of Andreas Embirikos (Agra, 2001); *A Vindication of Tlön: Photography & the Fantastic*, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography (2001); and *Panayotis Fatseas, Faces of Kythera* (Tetarto, 2008) as well as frequent research essays and contributions to symposia.

## "A SHABY SUBLIMITY"

The Sublime has long been a subject of abiding interest to both art historians and philosophers. In defining the term for the purposes of this visual essay, I hark back to some of the earliest sources on the subject, specifically Longinus and Edmund Burke. In Longinus, two notions in particular are relevant to my discourse; the first is his identification of sublimity with "a lofty and elevated style" which, he goes on to remark, all too often lapses into pomposity; the second is his description of the effect of power or force upon an audience: "To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no".

From Burke I borrow the ideas of over-

whelming awe and, once again, that of power. In Part 4 of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, he writes "the highest degree [of the sublime] I call *astonishment*; the subordinate degrees are awe, reverence, and respect"; in Part 2, "I know of nothing sublime, which is not some modification of power. And this branch rises, as naturally as the other two branches, from terror, the common stock of everything that is sublime".



Figure 2: John Martin: The Great Day of His Wrath, 1851-53

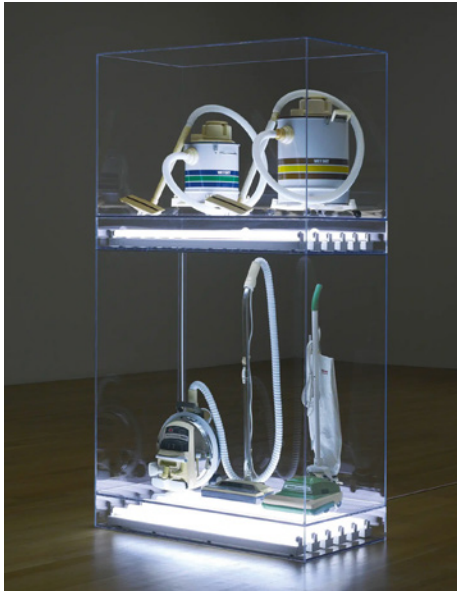
It is these two responses, Power and Awe, generated by means of an often merely assumed lofty and elevated style, that the Capitalist Sublime most desires to provoke. Its imagery celebrates or promotes two fundamental attributes of capitalism, power and consumption; if both can be accommodated simultaneously, so much the better. Capitalist Sublime imagery runs the gamut from high to low; high when the images are produced by recognized, high-status artists and photographers which aspire to the status of artistic productions, and low when they are produced in the interest of raw commercial activity. In either case, such images must be entirely free of questioning and above all of any trace of irony. Furthermore, in this context it may be useful to take intentionality under consideration, by which I mean that some works of Capitalist Sublime undoubtedly aim at sublimity, even though they may often lapse, as Longinus warns, into the merely bathetic.

Consider *New Hoover Celebrity IV*, *New Hoover Convertible*, *New Shelton 5 Gallon Wet/Dry*, *New Shelton 10 Gallon Wet/Dry Doubledecker*. This is the title of an iconic sculpture by American artist Jeff Koons, executed in the early eighties and consisting of the aforementioned four household appliances in an acrylic case. Eerily illuminated from beneath by fluorescent lighting which gives it a totemic



Figure 1: Titlepage to Longinus Rhetoris Liber (Oxford, 1636)  
Tate Research Publication, January 2013





**Figure 3:** Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Celebrity IV*, *New Hoover Convertible*, *New Shelton 5 Gallon Wet/Dry*, *New Shelton 10 Gallon Wet/Dry Doubledecker*, 1981-1986

appearance, the work makes a pitch for sublimity not merely visually but, above all, because it represents a capitalist paradigm: these vacuum cleaners, whose original street value would have been a few hundred dollars, have undergone a literally transcendental transformation by virtue of selection by the artist and subsequent validation by the art establishment. Their surplus value, which is appropriated by the artist and subsequently by dealers and collectors, stems not from labour but from something more intangible – a purely arbitrary sacralization by the art world. They have become objects of awe, and demand our admiration, not because of what they are, but because the markets have proclaimed them worthy of such awe.

The sublime comes naturally to a certain kind of architecture: to the cityscapes of great capitals, of course, and also to individual seats of influence, from palaces and civic buildings to banks. All seek to impress and overawe the viewer, if not with their majesty and power, then at least with sheer size and mass. Nobody has ever done this better than New York City, but nowadays, rivalry has become intense, particularly in the rapidly expanding economies of what was once dismissed as the third world. The rapid development of the Gulf State capitals, for instance, has birthed architectural monstrosities by the score – but of course, monstrosity has always been one facet of the sublime.

In 2009, Mark Fisher could suggest that “environmental catastrophe features in late capitalist culture only as a kind of simulacra, its real implications for capitalism too traumatic to be assimilated into the system”. And yet as he points out elsewhere in *Capitalist Realism*, there is really nothing that capitalism cannot eventually co-opt and commodify. In this context, the work of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky is peculiarly relevant. Burtynsky specializes in what, after the title of his best-known body of work, could be called ‘Manufactured Landscapes’, ranging from aestheticized post-industrial desolation to near-abstract aerial views of anthropogenic landscapes; in line with the Dusseldorf School, whose approach he espouses, he also produces large, impersonal panoramas of contemporary industrial workers on the job. These are, indeed very large prints, of a Gurskian size and quality, and they do very well on the art market; the \$60,000 achieved at a Philips sale in October, 2015 by a print of *Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province, China* was far from the artist’s record.

According to Martha Rosler, “the higher the price that photography can command as a



**Figure 4:** Allard Schager, *One World Trade Center*, New York, NY



**Figure 5:** Atlantis, The Palm, Dubai



**Figure 6:** Edward Burtynsky: Shipbreaking #12, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2000. Robert Koch Gallery



**Figure 7:** Lionel Walden, Cardiff Steelworks, 1893-97. National Museum of Wales



**Figure 8:** Edward Burtynsky, Oil Bunkering #4, Niger Delta, Nigeria, 2016. Robert Koch Gallery

commodity in dealerships, the higher the status accorded to it in museums and galleries". There can be little doubt that Burtynsky's work has accordingly achieved truly gratifying status – a status confirmed by the briefest glance at the list of exhibition venues in his CV. The great majority of Burtynsky's images, and particularly the post-industrial landscapes of the "Manufactured Landscapes" and "Industrial Sublime" series are squarely positioned in the line of descent from 18th and 19th century sublime landscape; the vastness of the subject matter and the size of the physical images both contribute to a sense of awe, swiftly followed by the contrasting emotion of terror, as the environmental implications of the scene depicted sink in, thereby neatly validating Burke's prescription of the sublime.

Undeniably sublime, then. But do they also conform to the category of imagery I am proposing, that of 'Capitalist Sublime'? I would argue that they do, since beyond the environmentalist message of these images, what they record – and implicitly celebrate – is the ultimate triumph of capitalism, the seemingly unstoppable and irreversible Gadarene imperative of development at any price; if they contain a barely encoded message, it is *Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!* And of course, that message is present irrespective of the photographer's perhaps ambiguous attitude to his work. Critics and commentators have praised the "palpable humanism" (Diehl 2006: 188-123) of these images, but others have remarked on their emotional remoteness and neutrality.

Raffi Khatchadourian's first-hand account of Burtynsky at work in Nigeria is not without relevance: "In Lagos, Burtynsky never picked up a camera to photograph the human



**Figure 9:** Lionel Walden, Aircraft from Carrier Air Wing 7 fly over USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, 2012. U.S. Navy photo: Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Julia A. Casper



drama around him. He was seeking to document not the struggles of individual Nigerians but the aggregate effect of those struggles, how they formed a combined image. 'What I am interested in is how to describe large-scale human systems that impress themselves upon the land,' he told me. A term that he often uses to describe his work, 'residual landscapes,'

political leaders aspire to project, even when nothing in their past experience justifies it."

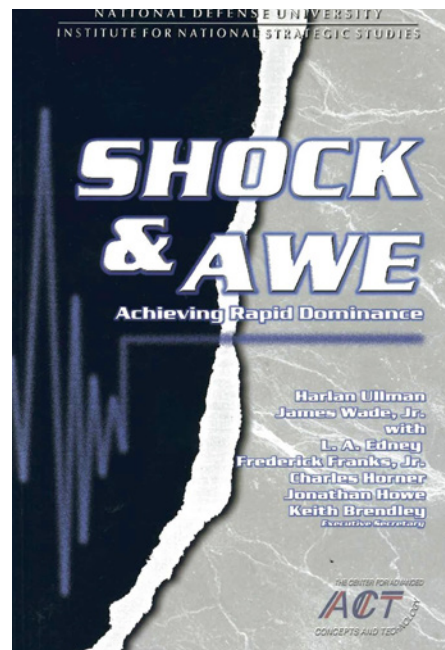
On March 20th, 2003, President George Bush went on television to inform the citizens of the United States that Operation Iraqi Freedom had been launched the previous day. In concluding a brief four-



**Figure 10:** Stephen Wilkes, F-35A jet at Eglin Air Force Base, VF September 16, 2013

implied an even more remote interest: man-made terrain distinct from people. [...] The moral complications that came with representing a living community—struggling with serious economic and political challenges, on a continent recovering from the legacy of colonialism—differed greatly from shooting abandoned quarries or First World megafarms.

Probably the least ambiguous version of Capitalist Sublime imagery is the depiction of raw military and political power, and what could possibly spell power more effectively than a billion-dollar airplane carrier? In fact, though they are enthused over by Donald Trump, most naval strategists today believe that in a war between major powers, carriers would prove little more than expensive targets. However, like the dreadnaughts of 1900, they are unrivalled as symbols of power; they also remain invaluable for purposes of propaganda or the intimidation of small-to-medium states. Successful photographs of military hardware usually indulge in a form of pathetic fallacy, in which the inanimate carrier, jet fighter or tank is photographed from an angle suggesting 'manly' aggression. The very same masculine virtue, indeed, which



**Figure 11:** Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock & Awe*. U.S. National Defence University, 1996

minute address, he assured his fellow-citizens that "now that conflict has come, the only way to limit its duration is to apply decisive force and I assure you this will not be a campaign of half measures and we will accept no outcome but victory" (Bush



Figure 12: Annie Leibovitz: "War and Destiny", Colin Powell, Dick Cheney & George W. Bush, Vanity Fair, Feb.2002

2003). This overly sanguine expectation reflected the so-called Doctrine of Rapid Dominance or, as it quickly became known, 'Shock and Awe', which was popular at the time amongst American military planners.

Propounded by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade in a 1996 paper which sought to define the USA's military doctrine for the 21st century, rapid dominance was defined as the use of overwhelming power and massive displays of force with a view to very rapidly destroying an enemy's will to resist. Regrettably, noted the authors, "while there are surely humanitarian considerations that cannot or should not be ignored, the ability to Shock and Awe ultimately rests in the ability to frighten, scare, intimidate, and disarm" (Ullman et al 1996: 34). The purpose of this doctrine, should anyone be unclear about it, was made clear by retired Admiral Bud Edney in the first appendix: "The top priority of Rapid Dominance should be to deter, alter, or affect those actions that are either unacceptable to U.S. national security interests or endanger the democratic community of states and access to *free markets*" (ibid: 103; *Italics added*).

The doctrine of Rapid Dominance was embraced with enthusiasm by the Bush administration, while the fashionable new jargon was eagerly adopted by the majority of press and media: "It was going to be the first war won by the new



Figure 13: Kevin Lamarque, Mission Accomplished!, 1 May 2003

Inset: W.G. Read, *Rough Riders*, 1898 (President Theodore Roosevelt at the Battle of San Juan Hill, Cuba)

doctrine of 'Rapid Dominance', delivering devastating firepower to 'shock and awe' the government and people of an entire nation-state into submission within days" (Sepp 2007: 217).

Annie Leibowitz's now notorious cover photograph of the Bush cabinet on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, published just a year before the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, could be seen as the epitome of Capitalist Sublime: under the banner headline "War and Destiny", with a nod to the long tradition of formal state portraiture, Leibowitz makes the case of George W. Bush, Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, George Tenet and Donald Rumsfeld for entry into the pantheon of great statesmen and women. Her solo portraits of the ultimately disastrous Iraqi venture's principal military sponsors were very much in the same vein, while a similar triumphalist rhetoric was adopted by the many US Army photographers in the field. There is of course a long tradition of similar glorification of the more bloodthirsty American presidents, though unlike George Bush and his misappropriated air force uniform, Theodore Roosevelt did at least experience combat at first hand.

Capitalism, particularly the currently dominant neoliberal model, is predicated upon infinitely expanding growth, requiring a consistently maintained level of consumption of goods and services.





**Figure 14:** BMW Group: Jeff Koons and the BMW Art Car at the Tour Eiffel, 2010.  
U.S. National Defence University, 1996

Consumption is in turn is created, inspired and maintained at the highest possible level through advertising of all kinds; but whether editorial, televisual or online, advertising demands bold visual imagery. Advertising imagery, particularly for those goods and services considered to be of an inherently superior quality, instinctively grasps for the sublime. Remember Burke: the sublime should generate first astonishment, then “awe, reverence and respect”, and are those not precisely the responses any good advertiser seeks to coax from his audience? Astonishment at the ingenuity deployed; awe at the increasingly complex technical proficiency displayed; and of course, the palpable reverence and respect the audience has for such ‘iconic brands’ as Cartier, Dior, Mercedes or Louis Vuitton.

Jeff Koons can be now be seen as having decayed, or perhaps the correct term might be morphed, into an ‘iconic brand’ of himself; certainly, his interface with the worlds of fashion and commerce is so seamless, such a natural and even inevitable extension of his art practice that he makes Andy Warhol look like a purist. His relationship with brands such as BMW and Louis Vuitton goes far beyond the now distinctly old-fashioned promotional deal whereby a celebrity publicly endorses a product: for is Koons promoting BMW, or is BMW promoting Koons? However that may be, the post-modern death of irony ensures that one can never be entirely clear of who, between Koons, BMW and their audience is being taken advantage of.

These are all goods whose selling price is deliberately divorced from any consideration of practicality or even outlay, since in most cases the single largest component of their production cost is precisely the cost of advertising. What they are designed to be is indicators of a superior socio-economic status. This does not mean that price is no longer relevant;



**Figure 15:** Jacob & Co. \$20 million Billionaire Timeless Treasure Tourbillon Yellow Diamond watch



on the contrary, in order to confirm their role as guarantors and boosters of social status, such goods must be, and must be seen to be, obscenely expensive. Use, efficiency, practicality, longevity, taste and even, when you come right down to it, elegance (however you define it) are all clearly beside the point in deciding between a \$ 75 swatch wristwatch and a \$20 million Billionaire "Timeless Treasure Tourbillon" timepiece. There is probably a certain counterbalancing effect in the ownership of such items, however, inasmuch as the flaunting of them could

It hardly needs to be said that many if not all such images are very far from representing what most of us would regard as in any way 'sublime'; but then what we are seeking here is intentionality rather than quality, and the image creators undoubtedly intended a shabby sublimity of a sort. And as we know, it is but a short step from the sublime to the ridiculous. Vogue, for example, published a breathtakingly tasteless series of photographs of the actress and model Keira Knightley in Kenya in their June 2007 issue, only to repeat the faux-pas five years later in



Figure 16: SeymourPowell aircraft interior design

backfire in terms of social status, unless of course your social circle consist largely of leading narcotraffickers.

In some cases, the goods being advertised are so vertiginously beyond the reach of all but a vanishingly minute fraction of the targeted audience that they can only be regarded as a kind of consumerist pornography, to be salivated over in resignation rather than lusted after; after all, the lowliest wage slave may perhaps hope to eventually own a Rolex watch, but he or she is unlikely to aspire to ownership of a private jet. A glossy ad for SeymourPowell, designers of bespoke executive aircraft interiors, goes one better by inserting the onscreen image of a racing sloop into the padded living accommodation of a jet.

Which leads us neatly on to a consideration of what must be one of the priciest private vessels currently on offer (order only), short of your very own airplane carrier: a yacht with icebreaker capability built by a company specialising in military vessels, enticingly described as "a warship that can sail the seven seas with style".

another post-colonial mashup which almost manages to evade the charge of racism thanks to its almost sublime obtuseness.

Perhaps, in the end, we are forced by such slides into the ludicrous to concede that though capitalism undoubtedly has the will and ability to reach for the heights of the Sublime, it is after all no more than a cheap and shabby simulacrum of the true Sublime.



Figure 17: Damen Yachts: SeaXplorer 75



Figure 18: Arthur Elgort, Keira Knightley in Africa, photographed for *Vogue*, 2012



*The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.*

Edmund Burke

Figure 19: Collage by the author



## NOTES

- [1] In an essay on Richard Serra published in 2015, Eugenie Shinkle noted perceptively that Serra's gigantic installation East-West/West-East, covering over a kilometer of the Qatari desert, "evokes a kind of capitalist sublime that finds its expression in gargantuan feats of spatial domination".
- [2] "The more combat power is packed into a single vessel, the greater the percentage of overall force combat power is lost if it is put out of action [...] the aircraft carrier is indeed uniquely capable, but it cannot tolerate much risk except under the direst strategic stakes." (Rubel, 2015)

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