

## The sublime indifference of waves

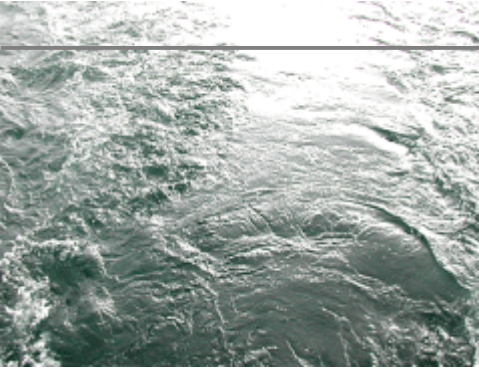
### Description

Who could fail to be moved by aerial images yesterday of the slew of mud, flaming buildings, vehicles, boats, and water, sliding inexorably across the landscape of the Fukushima, Ibaraki and Miyagi prefectures in Japan. The human tragedy was in full view as the white specs fleeing along country roads were eventually consumed by the debrisâ?? indifferent course.

How different is this view from the depiction of apocalypse in Romantic painting, such as John Martinâ??s (1789-1854) [Seventh Plague of Egypt](#), with tortured humanity in the foreground yielding to the biblical tsunami, a tragedy of nature that has some regard for the humanity it is destroying. Roland Emmerichâ??s 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow* similarly puts human drama at the centre as New York is engulfed not in sludge but pristine water lashing against skyscrapers. The sublime is after all less refined than the undiluted aesthetic imagination.

The sublime is that which escapes the reflective observerâ??s capacity to imagine or describe: the extent of the constellations, the size of an atom, pure transcendence, complete silence, the Big Bang, ceasing to be, power of the machine, the terrors of nature. It is as if in the face of such spectacle there is after all nothing that can be said.

Hank Stueverâ??s [article](#) in the *Washington Post* today highlights the difficulties faced by media meteorologists extemporising around drama as it unfolds: â??Rather than calmly provide information, [Chad] Myers filled the day with unhinged, even testy, seismological explanations and impossible-to-follow metaphors. A tsunami (or the shore?) is â??like a catcherâ??s mitt,â?? â??like a bananaâ??; the wave starts â??like a rock thrown in a pondâ?? and then it is not like a rock a thrown in the pond, not when you consider â??the crescent, the catcherâ??s mitt!â??•



For Immanuel Kant, the response to the *beautiful* in nature is calm

contemplation, but in consideration of the sublime one is â??moved.â?• According to Kant, â??This movement (especially in its inception) may be compared to a **vibration**, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object.â?• Human imagination, the capacity to represent or describe, and words fail us in the face of the sublime: â??What is excessive for the imagination . . . is as it were an abyss.â?• The concept of vibration, which is also readily ascribed to sound, comes to the aid of the aesthete in giving an account of catastrophe. Waves propagate, indifferently, at varying rates and at all scales, vibrations of varying periodicities: waves within waves, surging, refracting, interacting, and consuming. ç¥?ã?ã?¼ã?â®?ã??ã??ã?ã?«

## Reference

Kant, I. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

## Category

1. Art

## Tags

1. aesthetics
2. Art
3. media
4. tsunami
5. waves

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