



What were the skies like when you were young?

Description

Now I can see clouds, little fluffy clouds, distinctly, well-formed and illuminated, or at least I can reproduce skies in digital photography, thanks to the HDR, High Dynamic Range photography feature built into many digital cameras and smartphones.

As anyone knows who has taken a photograph while inside a room, the scenery through the window appears washed out, a white glare. If you set the exposure so that the view outside is clear and visible, then the room appears in darkness. Any camera with HDR capability takes two or more photographs in rapid succession, and with different exposure settings. It then combines the images to even out the exposure, in effect reducing extremes of contrast, or at least revealing detail in the extremely light and dark areas.



The human ocular apparatus is adept at coping dynamically with a wide variation in luminance values in the environment: movement of the iris, squinting, etc as the eye darts around the scene. But when scenes get translated to static images on paper or screen, parts of that range get cut out, producing over-exposed areas of white, or under-exposed shadow zones: glare and gloom — hence the need for HDR.

More sophisticated programs code high dynamic range into the image for later retrieval, for postprocessing, or to reproduce the effect of scanning round a room and reproducing something of the dynamism of the glare effect.

Another consequence of HDR is that external photographs of landscapes on overcast days preserve the brightness of the ground surfaces and the distinctiveness of the sky, showing detail in the formation of clouds. The cost is a “flattening” of the image, the removal of highlights and contrast, not to mention artefacts from the combining of two images, especially when the camera or the subject is in motion.

HDR provides yet another popular medium for testing the application of aesthetic theories. Let’s call the object of study the “artless image,” unselfconsciously produced, accidental, and everyday. Consider also the target of the image, such as the sky, not as beautiful, picturesque or pretty, but under the sway of the sublime.

HDR is among a species of attempts to capture and codify the sublime characteristics of light, shadow and sky in pictorial form: reproducing the ambitions of Romantic painters to represent the unrepresentable, with ever greater sophistication in the choice of colour and composition.

But the sublime can also be invoked by its opposite: a painting of a white square against a black background by Kazimir Malevich, a child’s drawing, the grainy special effects of early movies, and the sometimes carelessly rapid, incidental, multiples of amateur digital photography.

Consider another popular medium, that of ambient music. My intuitions about the appeal of the hit remix by Orb in the 1990s, *Little Fluffy Clouds*, lies precisely in the naïve, childlike pronouncement on the sublime spoken by singer Rickie Lee Jones during a ripped interview segment: “the sunsets were purple and red and yellow and on fire, and the clouds would catch the colours everywhere.” The words are backed by Steve Reich’s jaunty *Electric Counterpoint III*. It seems that words spoken without “artistry” or affectation veer towards the childlike and the pretty, several steps away from the more grown-up “feeling of the sublime.”

Sometimes innocent attempts at reproduction project us towards the sublime with ever greater resolve. Postmodern irony and the pictorial sublime combine (Lyotard, 1979).

Contrast the words of *Little Fluffy Clouds* with Edmund Burke on the sublime in architecture: “and in buildings, when the highest degree of the sublime is intended, the materials and ornaments ought neither to be white, nor green, nor yellow, nor blue, nor of pale red, nor violet, nor spotted, but of sad and fuscous colours, as black, or brown, or deep purple, and the like” (p.75). Catch glimpses of sombre skies as spectral hues of grey and dusk, and “a light which by its very excess is converted into a species of darkness” (p.74).



References

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- Lyotard, Jean-François. 1986. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- West Carey, Peter. 2011. Knowing My Limits â?? Why I Donâ??t Do HDR. *Digital Photography School* [Blog Site](#).

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3. Orb
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