

# What a Picture Wants

*by Anatoly Karlin*



The sea billows in its elemental rage and snow-capped mountains loom above the thick fog ahead. A schooner and dinghy flounder in a fury of air and water, forlorn and forsaken. Sailors can be made out on the two ships, frantic atoms against a backdrop of deadly beauty. Insignificant, they stand out. After all, the sublime needs a human presence (yardstick?) to be appreciated.

The painting is 'Stormy Sea' (1868) by Ivan Aivazovsky. He was one of the most prolific Russian artists and is especially famous for his mastery of the seascape, which ranged from the calm ('The Coast at Amalfi') to the catastrophic ('The Storm').

What does it mean to 'want'? Negatively defined, it is to be deficient in something, such that the absence of it grates on the soul. When we look at a picture, in a sense it becomes a part of us, a simulation in that part of the brain responsible for visual processing. Conflicts can appear between our innate sense of aesthetics and the simulation that was thrust into our mind. Presumably then, a picture is in want of something if it is deficient in something – an object, or perhaps something more general, say lighting. Or maybe it completely fails to arouse any interest and can be dismissed. In any case, let's say a picture wants what we want of it.

However, in 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being', Kundera wrote, 'we can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.' In other words, wanting cannot be an enterprise based on pure reason – since we live life only once (that we know of, anyway), we have

no basis for comparison had we decided to want another way. *Einmal ist keinmal*. When we perceive pictures, we do it from the prism of time and space – a form of intuition, according to Kant in the ‘Critique of Pure Reason’. They become for us (to use the existentialist slang). So when looking at pictures and their wants, we must cast aside the Apollonian and embrace the Dionysian. (This also conveniently saves me from exposing my ignorance of the jargon of art criticism. Should I really be writing this?).

People seek to add beauty in their lives. It is the silent orchestra to which they march to, the invisible sketch along which they tread. Commanding admiration, it is a source of social power that has been exploited since the cave art of the Upper Paleolithic.

Yet beauty has no moral value of its own. Dostoevsky remarked that ‘beauty is mysterious as well as terrible’; according to Schopenhauer, it reaches its pinnacle in the form of the sublime, a concept of greatness beyond mortal imagination. Schopenhauer saw beauty (pleasure through peaceful contemplation of a benign thing) rising to sublimity (pleasure through seeing a vast, threatening thing capable of undoing the observer) and reaching a terrifying crescendo in the ‘fullest feeling of sublime’ - knowledge of the vastness of the universe in all its dimensions and the consequent insignificance of the observer.

The power of nature has been the motif *par excellence* of art that seeks the sublime since the Romantic period. (I say ‘seeks’, because a storm on a canvass can never threaten the life of an observer in the same way a real storm could. At best, it can build shaky bridges to the sublime, by creating a simulation of the real storm inside the mind of the observer. On another, not entirely related note, movies and especially video games can create such ‘simulations’ much more effectively than a novel or painting – yet Film Studies are derided and I know of no Video Games courses. But I digress).

This subliminal, transcendent power of nature is made explicitly clear in ‘Stormy Sea’. Humans and their petty constructions are utterly powerless against Poseidon’s trident. The best they can do is cling onto their ships (finite chunks of wood hacked out of seamless, elemental Gaia) and pray her revenge doesn’t snuff out their finite, atomistic lives. And all the while the mountain towers all of them, as if it wants to bear them down into the water by the sheer scale of its presence.

I want this painting to go further. I want the waves to break apart the ships and spill its cargo across the waters. Not out of vindictiveness, but because I appreciate the aesthetic. ‘Apocalypse’ is derived from a Greek word that literally means a ‘lifting of the veil’, a kind of revelation to a chosen elect of the *eschaton*, which refers to the end of the world or similar big, bad thing. For the Apocalyptic in art is nothing less than the pinnacle of the human aesthetic. It is the act by which beauty morphs into sublimity; a graceful disrobement that lays bare the sublime in all its consummate transcendence.

The ships are physical manifestations of the human soul. In the painting, there is a break in the clouds which illuminates the ocean beneath it. There is a dark land mass from the left. (The dinghy, more ‘human’ in scale and spirit than the schooner, lies closer to both

light and darkness). Light is traditionally associated with hope and good; dark with despair and evil. Yet here they are in a cruel transposition, for the choice is either drowning in the illuminated water (succumbing to false hope) or seeking salvation on the black earth. Will they choose bliss, ignorance, the unbearable lightness of being; or will they choose the heavy burden of reason (which can dash them against its treacherous rocks)? And will they have a choice?

Therefore myself, I want the picture to come alive. Let the simulation play itself out. It might be deterministic... but the sublime soul knows that contemplation of the ungentle seas and rippling sky has value of its own. After all, gaming is fun.

As for the picture itself, I don't know what it wants. I do know what it doesn't want, though – people writing essays purporting to know what it wants.