

The Sublime and the Digital Landscape

Annie Dorsen



Annie Dorsen's *The Great Outdoors*,
We're Watching Festival.
The Fisher Center, Bard College,
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 2017.
Photo: Julieta Cervantes.
Courtesy of Live Arts Bard.

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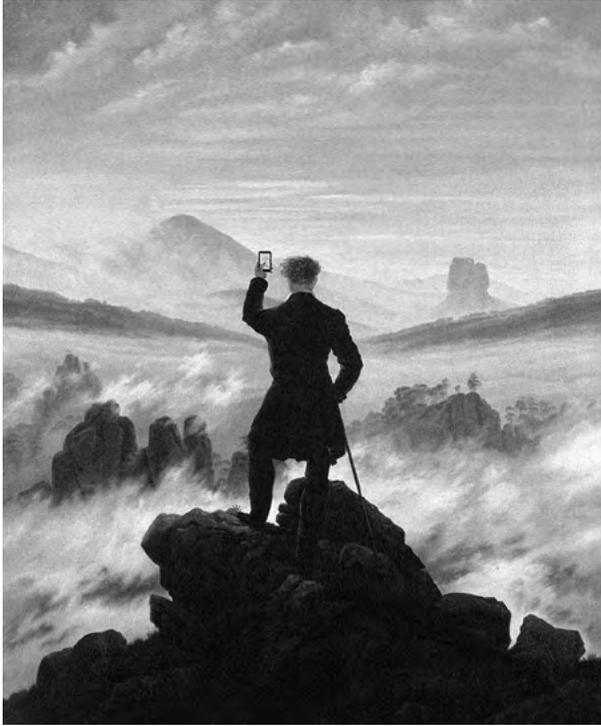
Annie Dorsen works in a range of fields, including theatre, film and dance. She is the co-creator and director of the Broadway musical, *Passing Strange*, which was also filmed by director, Spike Lee. Since 2010, Dorsen has worked within “algorithmic theatre”, in which computer algorithms fuel her stage work. She received the 2014 Herb Alpert Award for the Arts in Theater and a 2016 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Award. Annie Dorsen is a Visiting Professor in Theater and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago.

1. Looking Back

Last September, Andrew Sullivan wrote a piece about Internet addiction for New York Magazine. It was illustrated with these two pictures, created by Kim Dong-kyu:



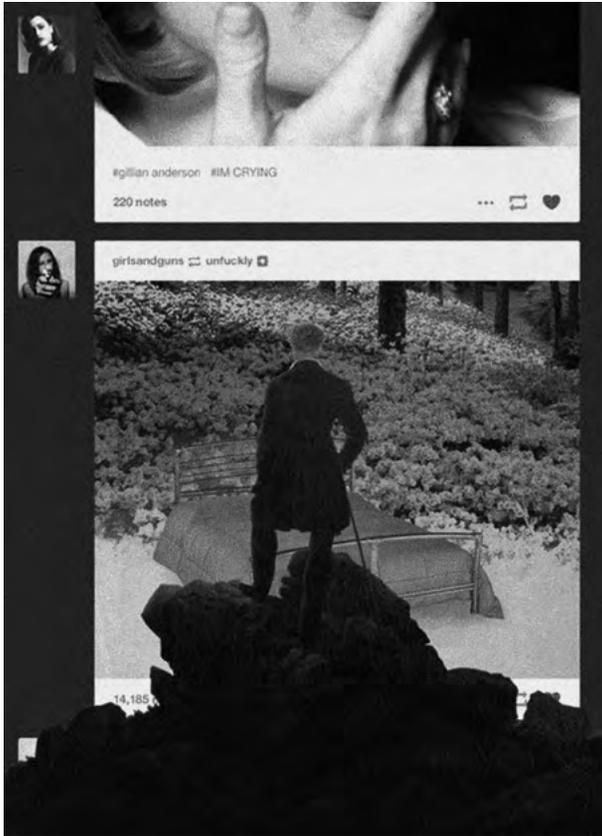
Kim Dong-kyu, *Luncheon*, 2013.
Courtesy of the artist.



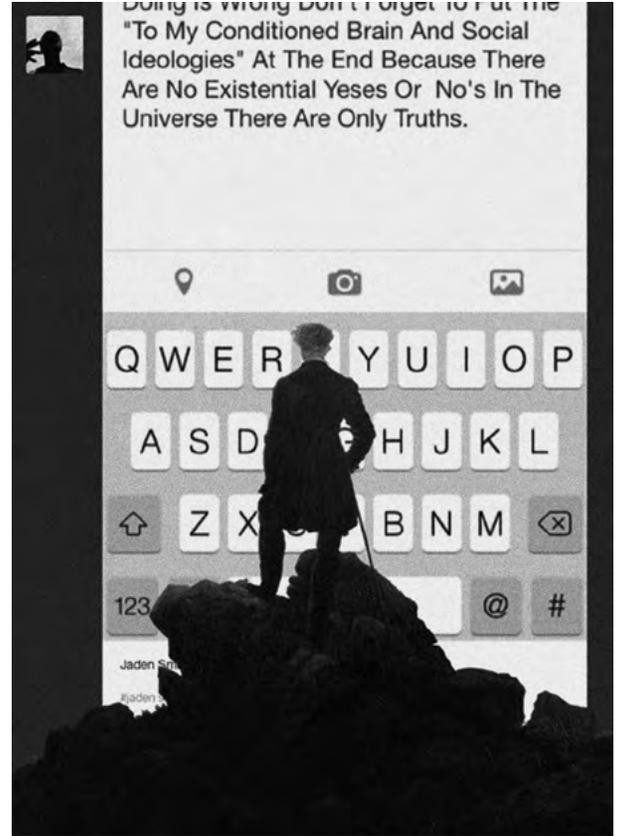
Kim Dong-kyu.
When you see the amazing sight, 2013.
Courtesy of the artist.

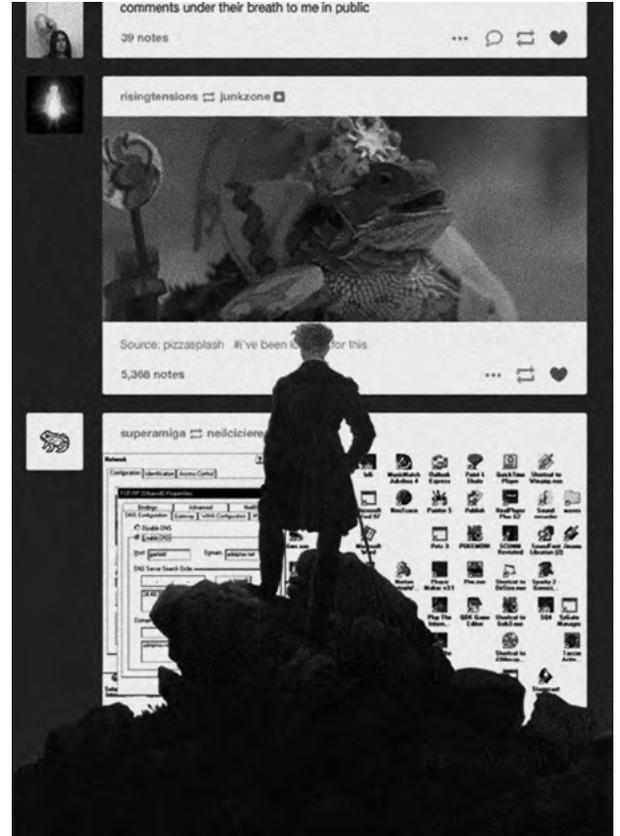
The second of these uses Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. In the context of its placement beside an essay about the dangers of compulsive Internet use, the image suggests a reproach: the subject is too absorbed by his phone to notice the real landscape in front of him. But the original painting has its own point to make about engagement and detachment. It already treats the landscape as spectacle – the Wanderer stands on a rocky outpost, a distant observer, a stand-in for the viewer of the painting who looks in the same direction, and at a similar remove. In the magazine illustration, the iPhone performs the same function as the frame of the original painting, to contain and manage the swirling chaos of the world, to make it two-dimensional, decorative and portable. In that sense, the illustration is more an update of the painting than a subversion.

But in fact there's a whole meme industry churning out images of this particular painting photoshopped with phones, tech logos, and other symbols of the Internet. Here are two still images taken from a moving GIF that I copied from someone's Facebook page:



Artist Unknown.
Photo: Courtesy of the author.





The gif makes a less moralistic, and more astute, observation than the illustration: the “sea of fog” itself has been replaced by Tumblr.

It makes sense that Friedrich’s painting is used so often for this sort of meme. These days it is something of a short-hand for Romanticism and the sublime. It has come to stand for the transcendent Kantian subject, as well as its intellectual and cultural corollaries: the opposition between human and world, the spectator’s gaze as a form of control, even imperialism.

Seeing that illustration in the Sullivan piece, and then the GIF, and then more and more images like them, got me thinking about how the Internet, as it grows in complexity and scale, and increases its reach into every aspect of our lives, is becoming a new form of quasi-natural landscape. And it is one that seems to occupy the same place in our imaginary as the natural landscape did in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century imaginary: vast, unknowable, awe-inspiring.

Like the landscape of the Romantic sublime, the Internet looks back. In the eighteenth century Romantics believed the physical world was animated by the omniscience of God; our twenty-first century digital landscape is animated by an equally mysterious and powerful intelligence: that of the Other. ‘Other’ people just like us, of course, but also more authoritarian and mysterious Others: corporations, governmental agencies, ‘terrorists’ and their crack teams of IT experts, data miners,

spammers, spiders, and hackers, who *may* be out there, watching.

Descriptions of the Internet frequently take on a Romantic cast. To use one example, in the opening sequence of Werner Herzog’s 2016 documentary *Lo and Behold*, pioneering computer scientist Leonard Kleinrock gives the director a tour of the room at UCLA where the first host-to-host message was sent in 1969. Kleinrock calls it “a holy place,” and compares that first moment of transmission not to Bell’s first telephone call (as one might expect), but to the moment of legend, when Christopher Columbus first spotted land across the Atlantic and called it a New World. Watching this scene, I thought of Keats, who compared his experience reading a new translation of the *Iliad* to Cortez’s similar moment of discovery:

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific—and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.¹*

—

1 Keats, John. 1816. *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*.

2. Techno Utopias

The sublime began as a literary concept. The first use of the term is in the *Peri Hypsous*, a kind of handbook for aspiring poets by the rhetorician Longinus in the third or maybe fourth century AD.

Via a series of seventeenth century translations into French and English, the concept gained popularity and emerged as a fundamental category of aesthetics, applicable to the appreciation of both nature and art. Analyses of the sublime proliferated throughout the eighteenth century, by British philosophers John Dennis and Edmund Burke and, most influentially, by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*.

Kant wrote of two forms of the sublime, the mathematical and the dynamic. The mathematical has to do with scale: immeasurability, the seemingly infinite, that which reminds us of our meager temporality. The dynamic is about the potential for catastrophe: volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, hurricanes. In the face of these natural phenomena, we are reminded of our bodies' weakness, of how easily we can be destroyed by the superior power of the world around us.

In the 1990s, David Nye proposed an "American technological sublime," a study of the near-religious religious awe that has accompanied technological advances throughout American history. He writes about the grand building projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

railways, dams, bridges, skyscrapers, and monuments. Nye relates these accomplishments to Manifest Destiny, the belief in a moral obligation to conquer and improve the North American wilderness. This version of the sublime is industrial, collective, popular. It was marked by ribbon-cutting ceremonies, mass tourism, and breathless newspaper editorials. That bustling sociability is far from the solitary contemplation of Friedrich's *Wanderer*.

In Nye's account, the technological sublime expresses itself in hymns to progress and growth; it is inspired by humanity's potential achievement rather than by its potential destruction. That optimistic view has dated badly, even after just two decades. By now, of course, many of the expansionist triumphs of American engineering stand crumbling from governmental neglect. Industrial ruins (and the related photography trend, ruin porn) suggest an even more direct connection to nineteenth century Romanticism, with its fetish for the quaintly decaying monuments of the classical past. Rust-belt wastelands, skeletal factories, dead malls, collapsing bridges, abandoned theme parks ... all they lack is a Wordsworth or a Shelley to memorialize them.

Look on my wpa-funded infrastructure, ye Mighty, and despair.

It is not only the promise of industrial technology that looks different in hindsight. Other forms of techno-utopia have fared just as badly. John Perry



Insult to Injury.
Yamanashi Prefecture, Japan, 2008.
Photo: Martin "Mandias" Lyle.



Romain Veillon, *Man of Steel*, series, 2015.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Barlow's 1996 manifesto, *The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, invokes the dream of the Internet as a space of enlightened self-interest, liberation from state control, and free circulation of thought. It now reads like a parody. "Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind." lol. But he was serious: this new world would be unbounded, de-territorialized, free from the intractable problems of bodies, identity, and matter. "All may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth." He describes himself and his fellow "natives" of the cybersphere as freedom fighters who will "spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts."

Look on my bulletin-board systems, ye Mighty, and despair.

Of course, the supposedly free space of the Internet was never really free of governmental control. It was originally developed as a military project. And the Internet is hardly dematerialized or disembodied. The environmental devastation from mineral mining and carbon emissions, the near-enslavement of workers in the tech industries, the ubiquity of racist and misogynistic online harassment . . . the "civilization of the Mind" that Barlow imagined looks a lot like good old meatspace civilization.

But while the internet's landscape is hardly free of 'real-world' conflicts and contradictions, it is a source of freedoms and dangers unique to

itself. It has its frontiers and unmapped territories: darknet sites accessible only through the anonymous browsing software Tor, like the now-defunct Silk Road, an electronic marketplace for drugs, or the Armory, an arms and weaponry supplier. We navigate the web alert to every site's potential for abuse by malicious, almost mythological online creatures: 4chan mobs, NSA spies, Putinbots, GamerGate harassers, and garden-variety trolls. All this gives the internet a flavor of the more familiar Romantic sublime, which as Kant puts it "arouse[s] enjoyment but with horror." We are all familiar with the feeling of "negative lust" he articulated – during a Facebook binge, perhaps, or down in the depths of a clickhole – in which attraction and repulsion commingle, and pleasure is touched by anxiety, pain and fear.

Nineteenth century Romantic depictions of the wild landscapes that characterize the sublime were nostalgic, a reaction to Enlightenment regimes of rationalism, and scientific and technological ascendancy. Their sublime was the by-product of a contradiction: the longing for emotional excess in a world that had lost its mystery, and simultaneously a recognition of the power of reason to overcome emotion. This accords with Kant's description of the sublime as a two-step phenomenon. In the first moment, we are overwhelmed by forces beyond our control, and in the second we reassert our ability to understand and therefore to master those forces:

"Now in just the same way the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty of judging ourselves as independent of nature Therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it elevates the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can come to feel the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature."

It is only a short-hand to call a natural object, an artwork, or a building 'sublime' – in the Kantian sense, the sublime isn't a *property* of a thing, it is an occasion for human reason to recognize its own transcendence.

But that recognition can only take place if the would-be recognizer is not in any real danger. As Kant writes, "*provided our position is secure,*" hurricanes, volcanoes, and so on are "all the more attractive for [their] fearfulness; and we readily call those objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature" (italics added). But what happens when there is no repose, no safe place from which to contemplate?

In the mid 1970s, Thomas Weiskel examined the sublime in Romantic poetry from the

perspective of structuralist linguistics, re-orienting Kant's sublime toward a feeling of cognitive rupture in which the relation of signified and signifier breaks down from an excess of material on one side of the equation or the other. In the first case, bombarded by an excess of signifiers, the subject is overwhelmed by repetitions, a sensory overload, an "on and on" in which "the signifiers cannot be grasped or understood, they overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive under-determination that melts all oppositions or distinctions into a perceptual stream."² In the second case, an excess of signifieds paralyzes the mind with a massive over-determination, in which one can read so much into a given image or word that it becomes overloaded, a black hole of potential meanings. In this second scenario, one risks falling into a schizophrenic state of "absolute metaphor," in which anything might plausibly mean anything. The excess of both types is apocalyptic; Weiskel calls it "death by plenitude".

Weiskel's reading might be a good description of the notion of the digital sublime, were it not lacking a discussion of information technologies and the radical changes they have brought to aesthetics, linguistics and our understanding of cognition itself.

2 Weiskel, Thomas. 1986. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Psychology of Transcendence*. p 23. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Unsurprisingly, given the period in which he wrote, he sees the computer merely as a "symbol of determinism," without intuiting the overwhelming indeterminacy that countless competing determinisms might produce. But he does introduce an important point; rather than a momentary shock, his sublime extends in time, a relentless mix of pleasure and pain without relief.

He also notes the possibility of a sublime that descends, in contrast to Kant's imagery of elevation, lift, and raising above or over. The terms we use to describe wallowing in internet culture (*deep dive*, *clickhole*, etc) indeed suggest a spiraling down into depths – despite the obvious lack of depth to the screens we use. Is there such a thing as depth to a sequential series of flat images? There's certainly no span to our encounters with the Internet: one looks in one direction only, at a small rectangle that erases the space to its left and right. And this perhaps gives a feeling of boring in and down rather than of scanning a terrain. We are drowning in 'vulgar commonplace' rather than raised above it.

Sianne Ngai has recently coined a new term, *stuplimity*, the stupid sublime: "a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion or fatigue." She describes a 'thickening' of repetitions and variations that is both overwhelming and wearying. Thick language

layers itself on top of itself, accumulating more and more potential meanings until the cognitive pipes get clogged.

Language piles up in a “mushy heap” of fragments, repetitions, enumerations, permutations. The boring part of *stuplimity* “resides in the relentless attention to the finite and small, the bits and scraps floating in the ‘common muck’ of language.”³

Ngai tracks this tendency through modernist writers (Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett) and postmodern visual artists (Ann Hamilton, Gerhard Richter, Janet Zweig), but it is the contemporary poet Kenneth Goldsmith whose work best exemplifies what Ngai is getting at.

She discusses Goldsmith’s piece *No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96* (1997), but I am also thinking of his installation, *Printing Out the Internet* (2013). Over the course of about a month, Goldsmith invited contributors to print out pages from the Internet and send them to an art gallery in Mexico City, where the exhibition was displayed. Contributors sent in over ten tons of paper. (Notably, the project was inspired by and dedicated to intellectual freedom activist, Aaron Schwartz, and over 250,000 pages of Jstor articles were submitted in his honor.) Here is what the installation looked like in the gallery:

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3 Ngai, Sianne. 2007. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. p. 278.



Kenneth Goldsmith,
Printing Out the Internet, 2013.
Photo: Marisol Rodriguez.
Courtesy of LABOR Gallery.

Printing Out the Internet addresses both the mathematical and the dynamic sublimes. The project offers a frisson of contemplating the totality of the Internet, the sheer overwhelming amount of it. An infinity of information, and the concrete materiality of the supposedly ephemeral.

Scholarly essays from Jstor, and all that disposable language we post, share, and tweet, all the data produced by likes and downvotes, logins and check-ins and selfies—all this intellectual trash sticks around, accumulating, overwhelming our ability to metabolize it, like the shards of plastic found in the stomachs of dead birds who are washed up on shore. It also evinces the dynamic sublime, via the environmental anxiety it causes. Since the call to “save paper” was one of the earliest and most basic conservationist demands, the project provokes a kind of gluttonous horror at the absolute waste it entails.

Borges’s library of Babel is real and we wrote it, all together. But, like the old Stephen Wright joke goes, you can’t have everything; where would you put it?

The question of authorship brings us back to Longinus, the third century literary theorist whose *Peri Hypsous* originated the notion of the sublime:

“For our soul is raised out of nature through the truly sublime, sways with high spirits, and is filled with proud joy, as if itself had created what it hears.”⁴

For Longinus, the sublime engenders a sense of identification with the creator: we are so touched by what we hear, and touched so directly, we feel as if we had written it. But when we contemplate the Internet sublime, in contrast to the earlier third century or eighteenth century versions, we *did* create what we hear. And what we feel is probably not proud joy, exactly. This may be the most sickening aspect of our contemporary sublime: we look out into the shapeless infinities and see ourselves.

The landscape turns out to be a mirror, and the unease we feel, the awareness of our insignificance and frailty—these are provoked by us, in aggregate. It is a world built by the swarm, by billions of tiny, self-interested actions taken by billions of tiny, self-interested people.

It may be that the awe-inspiring anxiety of the digital sublime is, in part, a corollary effect of a crisis within the ideology of the self. The result of all these liberationist fantasies of the cybersphere, of self-construction and escape from the body, of endlessly available contact with others, of unlimited mobility, of infinite access: meaninglessness, and so, so much of it. But not only meaninglessness. There’s meaningfulness, too. There’s the trivial side-by-side with matters of global urgency, banality and profundity and everything in between, all mixed up together, coming at you in torrents, day and night.

—

4 Longinus. *On the Sublime*. VII, 2.

3. *The Great Outdoors*

My new performance project *The Great Outdoors* uses a model of entropy as its macro structure—both in the thermodynamic sense (the inevitable deterioration of all systems of order, the winding down of energy in the world), and in Claude Shannon’s appropriated use of the term in the field of information theory, (the measure of unpredictability, randomness, and repetition in text).

The cybernetician Norbert Wiener has taken credit for suggesting that Shannon borrow the term *entropy* from physics on the grounds that since no one really knew what it meant no one would object, and he includes a short discussion of it in his 1950 book *The Human Use of Human Beings*:

“It is a foregone conclusion that the lucky accident which permits the continuation of life in any form on this earth, even without restricting life to something like human life, is bound to come to a complete and disastrous end ... In a very real sense, we are shipwrecked passengers on a doomed planet. Yet even in a shipwreck, human decencies and values do not necessarily vanish, and we must make the most of them.”⁵

5 Weiner, Norbert. 1954. *The Human Use of Human Beings*. p. 40. Da Capo Press.

This passage, and particularly the image of the shipwreck, could also be a gloss on Friedrich’s painting, and as such suggests a relationship between entropy and our human fragility in the face of the world *out there*. The “doomed planet” he refers to has obvious environmental implications for contemporary readers. Even if taken simply in Wiener’s intended sense, that of the ultimate loss of energy in the universe leading to what physicists call “heat death,” there’s a decided connection between entropy and the sublime, the “delightful horror,” as Edmund Burke called it, that both inspires and overwhelms, seduces and repels.

On the text side, *The Great Outdoors* uses Internet comments as a corpus from which to fashion a monologue. The computer programmers I am working with, Miles Thompson and Marcel Schwittlick, designed a system that continuously collects comments from a relatively small number of threads on Reddit and a few other chat sites.

Over the course of the 24 hours before the performance, our average haul is close to a million comments, from which our algorithm chooses roughly two hundred for a given show. The system then arranges those from the most common and predictable to the most dense and complex – eventually so dense and complex that the sequences of letters are essentially random. Here is a short section from the beginning-ish of one output:

Uh, yeah.
You were.
Uh, yeah.
Nah, bro.
Haha cool!
Can confirm.
and on and on.
Hiya Jonathan!
/tin foil hat
left or right
Actually yes.
Yeah seriously.
A serial killer.
Fucking coward.
O gotcha, thanks.
Orange Julius Caesar
Bullshit stereotype.
They called me a cunt
stuff like this please
Indirectly . . . yeah
Jesus fucking christ.
>Few minutes later.
Little thrill Sikas.
Umm wtf seriously.

Are you sure you aren't 14?
Before, during, and after.
Fucking Bojack Horseman lol
>It's also unconstitutional.
That is what it was called!
A crunchy taco weighs 78 grams.
Is it you or is it someone else?

And here's a bit from the end-ish:

GET YOUR PITCHFORKS
HERE>>>Pitchfark emporium
Gat ur patchforks Patchfarks af al
cizeslil farks Dem biggun farks-
-__--_---_----E (clearins)-----e
(smalr akwaman try-dent---F)
clearins(--E Dem lil faks-----
-----E Dem
bigguns!!@!!!@!!!!
"No, I'm Spartacus." "No,
I'm Spartacus." "No,
I'm Spartacus." "No,
I'm Spartacus." "No, I'm

Spartacus." "No, I'm
 Spartacus." "No, I'm
 Spartacus." "No, I'm
 Spartacus." "No, I'm
 Spartacus." "No, I'm
 Spartacus." "No, I'm
 Spartacus." "No, I'm Spartacus."
 > how strong family ties can
 be sadly, political dynasties...
 leeching off OFWs/successful
 relatives ..T_____

_____T
 Dog -*huuuhhhh* 'woof...'Cat
 -*wispers*'don't.....move.....a
 muscle'Dog- *walks away*
 Cats-'when I get my hands on
 youMMEEARREAWWWW!!'
 mmm....{don't do it}....
 MMMM....{stahp!}....
 MMMMMMM...!!!!
 CAN'T HOLD IT IN ANY
 LONGER!!!*notices ur
 bulge***OWO,*** **^WHAT'S**
 **^^THIS?*

Mid-interrupt: "and then...**...we
 decided...**#to get t... WHY
 ARE YOU STILL TALKING, BOB?!"
 >I don't care ~~what~~ **who**
 it is if ~~it~~ **they** taste~~s~~
 good I'll eat ~~it~~ **them**.
 FTFY
 Seven hells!!! :((((((((((((((((ive done
 so much tbh :(okay imma report
 it to DOLE, but i dont know how..
 :(

$$(1.35 \times 4)A + (8)A = B/12(1.35 \times 4 + 8)A = B/12A = (B/12)/(1.35 \times 4 + 8)$$
 Ta-da
 -'6184:_/ lgjsgghng-#-!+!//947))'-
 @?1+3+?"::*)2'%#+?\${+_)
 @'#"-\${-#--
 #&@%_6@99!0@)+\${=
 .xhxhxfudjsbdbbcjcdjdbctxxusj

Each of these comments came from somewhere and from someone; each had a context, an intention, an originating desire of the poster to speak and to be heard. Once posted, however, the comment accrues other meanings. It collects metadata: time-stamp, location, keywords, number of characters, number and types of interactions (replies, likes/upvotes, etc), and other structural or administrative information.

These data can be analyzed statistically, in relation to that of other items within the corpus, and that statistical information can be used in any number of ways.

About Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, Ngai writes "words are deliberately presented in 'long strings' rather than conventional sentences and where the repetition of particular words and clauses produces a layered or 'simultaneous' effect." Ngai's use of the word 'string' in relation to language brings to mind the term's use in computer science, which refers to a finite sequence of characters, drawn from the set of all possible sequences in the alphabet. In algorithmic processes, the semantic meaning of the words made up from these characters is usually irrelevant to the operations being performed on them. Even in some of the more sophisticated techniques we use in *The Great Outdoors*, which do select and order comments at least partly on the basis of their semantic meaning, it is not actually 'the meaning' of the word as a human understands it that the

system deals with. The algorithm rather works with a symbolic, mathematically-manipulable representation of that meaning.

This tension between the visible and less-visible meanings of digital language suggests new forms of textual organization. If one organizes text according to criteria associated with its status as 'string' rather than as 'sense,' one finds an incoherent surface (what seems like a mushy heap) masking a rigidly logical understructure. In any given performance text of *The Great Outdoors*, each comment has nothing to do with the others in terms of topic, voice or argument.

But in fact our texts are ruthlessly organized, according to the parameters we have used to model Shannon entropy. A set of (relatively) simple graphs diagram the understructure, which is reminiscent of a rather traditional dramatic structure: exposition, development, rising action to climax, denouement. Despite the absolute difference of each performance text on the level of actual words spoken, there is absolute uniformity of each text on the level of structure. As Ngai writes, "where system and subject converge is ... where language piles up and becomes 'dense.'" *The Great Outdoors* is, among other things, an attempt to access, experience and inhabit this convergence.

4. The Stuplime

Is Donald Trump the ultimate artist of the stuplime? In a recent piece for the New York Review of Books, Masha Gessen quotes from an interview Trump gave to the Associated Press on April 17, 2017, as an example of his “ability to take words and throw them into a pile that means nothing”:

“Number one, there’s great responsibility. When it came time to, as an example, send out the fifty-nine missiles, the Tomahawks in Syria. I’m saying to myself, “You know, this is more than just like, seventy-nine [sic] missiles. This is death that’s involved,” because people could have been killed. This is risk that’s involved, because if the missile goes off and goes in a city or goes in a civilian area—you know, the boats were hundreds of miles away—and if this missile goes off and lands in the middle of a town or a hamlet ... every decision is much harder than you’d normally make. [unintelligible] ... This is involving death and life and so many things ... So it’s far more responsibility. [unintelligible] ... The financial cost of everything is so massive, every agency. This is thousands of times bigger, the United States, than the biggest company in the world.”⁶

6 Gessen, Masha. May 13, 2017. *The Autocrat’s Language*. New York Review of Books.

Gessen then lists the words in this passage (“responsibility”, the number “fifty-nine” and the number “seventy-nine”, “death”, “people”, “risk”, “city”, “civilian”, “hamlet”, “decision”, “hard”, “normal”, “life”, the “United States”) that Trump has rendered meaningless, and writes, “Trump’s word-piles fill public space with static. This is like having the air we breathe replaced with carbon monoxide. It is deadly. This space that he is polluting is the space of our shared reality.” Are we heading for an environmental crisis occurring in virtual space? The airwaves of our communications are becoming clogged with unsignifying noise, our political commons filling up with strings of repetitive trash. We suffer from non-stop agitation and fatigue.

Historically and now, the sublime is not a cozy aesthetic. It says: everything will collapse, will be too much for us to bear, will destroy us in the end... but temporarily, from a safe perch, we can enjoy a frisson of the coming catastrophe. Edmund Burke thought the frisson was good for us, a kind of exercise for the soul, which like physical exercise is uncomfortable at the time but pays off later in greater strength. Ngai isn’t so optimistic; in stuplimity, reason is pulverized and it just gives up.

Faced with the overreach and limits of rationalism amidst the current tornado of irrational actions and events, it is tempting to abandon the hard work of trying to make sense, to take refuge in overpowering emotions and sensations that are their own justification and their own reward. We

are currently seeing up close the seductiveness of unreason, the ease with which nostalgia warps into a longing for chaos, how the lulz go viral. But let us try to avoid the capitulation that Ngai describes. With luck the digital sublime, like Burke's proto-Romantic version, will prove to be good exercise, and will fortify us for the challenges to come.