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The Sublime in Jennifer Reeder's *A Million Miles Away*

J. RONALD GREEN

Jennifer Reeder's film, *A Million Miles Away* (2014), shown at Sundance in 2015, opens an unsuspected door to the sublime. When the mean girls in a high school music class—after menacing their substitute teacher—suddenly start singing an a cappella cover of Judas Priest's "You've Got Another Thing Comin'" in perfect choral unison, tears overwhelm the teacher. Harmonies transport the annealed chorus, the astonished teacher, the transformed film, and the translated viewers to a place "a million miles away" from the institutional scene of instruction. This is an effect that wants to be understood, since, not only are the harmonies beautiful and the surge of feeling exhilarating, but more than that—feeling wells up in the audience in response also to an organized and dangerous force represented by those troubled but suddenly self-empowered girls.

For me, that epiphany was implausibly reminiscent of the moment when a smoldering tower erupts in James Benning's documentary, *Ruhr* (2009), perhaps the most sublime stroke in recent cinema. When the industrial cooling tower in Benning's film erupts, which happens five times during a 60-minute take of Warholian dimensions, the massive cloud and unearthly noise of exploding super-heated coke is a spectacle drawing directly on a sense of dread, signaling the presence of the sublime. What, however, would connect this industrial-strength, monumental long take to a quotidian situation such as a high school girls' chorus singing a pop song in a conventionally edited narrative film? What does Reeder's little high school chorale have to put up against such catastrophic stuff? An examination of my eccentric reception of the disparate scenes in Reeder's and Benning's films led me to the aesthetic sublime, an idea that is surprisingly uncommon in discussions of experimental cinema.¹

ABOVE Jennifer Reeder, *A Million Miles Away* (2014) and RIGHT James Benning, *Ruhr* (2009), frame enlargements. All images courtesy the artists.

APPROACHING THE SUBLIME

On reflection it appears that the most important and affecting experimental filmmakers have for decades articulated experiences of the sublime. It's easy to see it in such images as Benning's—his smoking tower is not just a rhetorical or visual tour de force that catches us by surprise; it poses a different order of experience, including overwhelming majesty, as discussed by William Wees in the context of Bruce Conner's use of atom-bomb imagery.² But in addition to Conner's "nuclear sublime," we have, to name a few, Stan Brakhage's epic Romantic and grand abstract-expressionist cadences; Carolee Schneeman's high-voltage *Fuses* (1967); Hollis Frampton's cosmic, ironic, *Lemon* (1969), plus his epic Magellan cycle; Warhol's diurnal *Empire* (1964); and Leslie Thornton's post-apocalyptic *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984-present). More recently, we have Ken Jacobs's berserker *Seeking the Monkey King* (2011); Scott Stark's astounding *Bloom* (2012) and *The Realist* (2013); Bruce McClure's ruinous, threatening, hammering, perceptually and psychologically fugal projector-performance pieces; and Lucy Raven's digitally and politico-economically profound etudes, such as *Curtains* (2014). Yet the body of critical discourse on the sublime in experimental cinema is thin, suggesting the need for exploration of the traits of the aesthetic sublime, and their applicability to this field.

This essay approaches this project by focusing on the power of one sublime scene in Reeder's short film. And though I cannot do justice to a two-thousand-year discussion of one idea about which there is still no consensus, some idea of the sublime is required to account for the remarkable success of Reeder's film. Among the many characteristics affiliated with the sublime, the following seem pertinent: (1) The sublime is scary, and the beautiful is not. The sublime can be beautiful, and the beautiful can be sublime, but the merely beautiful is not sublime—something more is needed, such as overwhelming grandeur or terror. (2) The scariness of the aesthetic sublime is not experienced as a direct physical threat. Being assaulted or facing death in real life is not sublime, but in art it can be. A Cormac McCarthy-like menace is—in the mode of the aesthetic sublime—experienced from a position of safety, though its value depends on its apparent proximity to danger. (3) The sense of dread can happen just by our being made to experience enormity. The mathematical sublime, discussed below, includes a sense of the inconceivably numerous, complex, or small, such as the idea or experience of infinity or the infinitesimal. (4) The staring into someone's eyes as a portal of the soul, as in Marina Abramovic's "The Artist is Present" (2010) or Jesper Just's videos. (5) The power of numbers in the form of annealed collective action. And, (6) the sublime can lead through education, in its broadest sense, to empowerment.

It is evident that *Ruhr* combines at least three elements related to the sublime—massive scale, overwhelming complexity, and awe-inspiring dread—to generate its impact. Kant, in *The Critique of Judgment*, helps explain these aesthetic elements. He defines two sublimes, the mathematical and the dynamical, and

notes the common denominator of fear and its transcendence by rational perceivers. His examples of the dynamical include "clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation."³ Anyone who has witnessed Benning's shot of the smoking tower will have no problem adding it to Kant's images of thunder clouds, volcanoes and hurricanes, even though Benning's film offers an icon of, not nature, but military-industrial catastrophe, where 9/11 terrorism and heavy industry are felt as forces of nature—a 21st-century version of Milton's 17th-century demons of industry and William Blake's 18th-century "dark Satanic Mills."⁴



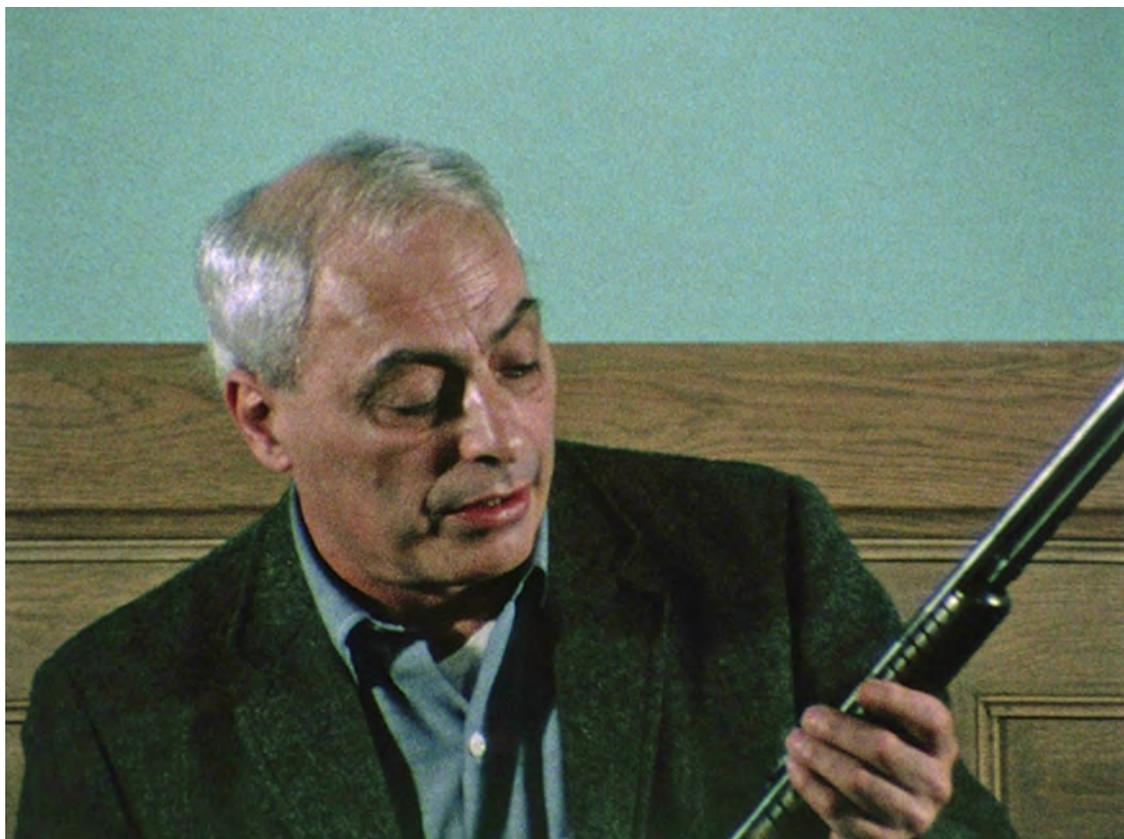
James Benning, *Ruhr* (2009), frame enlargement.

Kant's mathematical sublime refers to the scale and incomprehensibility of detail within the threatening aesthetic experience.⁵ We can see this at work in the near-infinite density and vector complexity of the smoke in Benning's film—an experience of complexity that defies our ability to comprehend it even as we stand immediately in its presence.

The very title of Reeder's film nominates it for the mathematical sublime. In viewing the film, however, it is not necessarily clear how the mathematical, or any other, sublime might actually be at work—my reception of this scene remains, for most viewers, eccentric. Admittedly, Reeder's singing teenage girls hardly command such grand-scale associations as Conner's

atom bombs, so why did Reeder's high school chorus conjure for me the awesome grandness of Benning's apocalyptic smoking tower in *Ruhr*? I did not ask myself that question first. Instead, thinking of the context of Reeder's girls' choral eruption, I asked whether *A Million Miles Away*'s effect on me could be related to any additional instances of the cinematic sublime, other than the highly dissimilar eruption in *Ruhr*. Even though I was not looking for another Benning movie, I thought right away of a long take in his *Landscape Suicide* (1986).

A California high school girl sits on her bed doing teenage things such as talking on the phone and reading magazines while Benning's soundtrack plays a complete rendition of the song,



James Benning, *Landscape Suicide* (1986), frame enlargements.

“Memory” (from *Cats*), performed by Barbara Streisand, which ends:

If you touch me
You'll understand what happiness is
Look, a new day has begun⁶

Benning's scene, accompanied by the power of Streisand's voice can bring tears to an audience, just as did Reeder's scene for me. I admire but do not worship Streisand's voice; plus, the lyrics of “Memory” are an abuse of poetry, and I have no interest in Andrew Lloyd Webber's music. Nevertheless, the effect of these combined elements in *Landscape Suicide* is sublime, and, in contrast to the roiling apocalypse of *Ruhr*, it is more obviously related to Reeder's scene of the high school girls singing the repurposed heavy-metal song. How to account for these unlikely instances of the sublime?

Longinus's ancient definition focuses on both content and rhetoric—his sublime was accomplished rhetorically through carefully-arranged images and the elements of speech: great thoughts, strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified word arrangement.⁷ In these terms, Benning, for example, is famous for rhetoric, his approach to shooting and editing; however, much of the effectiveness, originality, and insight of *Landscape Suicide* is also in the content—his famous durational shooting would not have the same sublime effect without the content. In the scene described above, we watch unblinking for several minutes the “remembered” image of a young, innocent girl who we know has been murdered by another young, innocent girl. At the same time, we hear a sentimental, plaintive song about the memory of youth, romantic and physical love, and happiness. The song is sung by a voice that is pure and strong, one of the most gifted voices of our era.⁸ The content of the shot—the original sentimentality of the lyrics and professionalism of the voice—are translated into genuine sentiment by Benning's rhetorical strategy of direct exposure to, even if somewhat ironically, the quotidian scenes of pain, murder, and sadness that have been invested rhetorically. The factors here that relate to scale and threat—which are among the characteristics of the sublime that I privilege in my discussion above—are (1) the *scale of the emotional dynamics* accompanying the proximity of death, (2) the *scale of the physical dynamics* and tonal grace of the singing voice, and (3) the *scale of the emotional distance* between, on one side, the *happiness* of teenage promise evoked by the song and visual portrait of the young girl, and, on the other side, the viewer's *despair* or *grief* in the sure knowledge of violence and death. All of these large-scale elements are together embedded by Benning in a setting of small-scale, everyday American life, including long tracking shots of the girls' ordinary neighborhood accompanied by long tracks of ambient local radio. It is from that common perspective of everyday lives that we experience Benning's elements of the sublime; and that

perspective also helps establish a grand difference in scale.

What is at stake for Benning is a truth underlying the surface of traditional middle-class life in America, a truth that he shows can be exposed for recognition and consideration by paying rhetorically-appropriate attention to almost any of the readily available pressure points of daily life, such as the endless newspaper articles of tragedy in many neighborhoods in every town. Benning's penetrating gaze into versions of his own neighborhoods opens the viewer to the sublime in a way mainstream newscasts and documentary do not, and Benning's opening into the depth and complex emotional and political meaning that lies behind the shallow and simplified diet provided by mainstream media is what is at stake in the deployment of the sublime by experimental artists' moving image. Another way to put it is that an understanding of the aesthetic sublime helps demonstrate how mainstream cinema and artists' moving image use spectacle and attraction differently.

So, the confluence of content and rhetoric of *Landscape Suicide* strongly contributes to its grand effect. In *Landscape Suicide* it is primarily the use of the long take in the “Memory” scene discussed above, plus the careful preparation for this scene by setting, shooting, and editing of the “Memory” scene contextually through interviews with the “murderer” and very long tracking shots of the protagonists' actual neighborhood with accompanying ambient and ironic local “commentary” on the car radio.

By way of comparison, in Reeder's choral scene in *A Million Miles Away*, the ideas, emotions, and figures of thought and speech in the appropriated Judas Priest song are strong, to which Reeder adds the noble diction of the mean girls' classical—and aurally sacred—choral arrangement. Add to these rhetorical tactics Reeder's own arrangement of the film's shooting and editing. By comparison, Benning in *Landscape Suicide* rhetorically prepares his scene of the young murder victim with scenes of everyday life. Similarly, Reeder prepares her own sublime scene of young girls and their harmonized voices by preceding it with densely packed scenes of girls' daily lives, including close-ups of incomprehensible texting jargon, fragments of stories of the sordid family dramas that the girls are living, lyrics from girls' pop songs, diary entries, titles of books the girls are reading, the titles of shades of lipstick, and snippets of conversation such as “Prom is for assholes” and “I sorta wanna go,” “Yeah, me too,” and “All us girls will go together.” This raw content of everyday life is actually arranged with precise rhetorical care to enhance the transcendent grace of the a cappella singing to come. When “all [the] girls ... go together,” the scene of the suddenly unified young women singing a richly harmonized song reverses an earlier scene in which one of the chorus' members is alone in her bedroom, crying, streaking her eye makeup into a horror-movie mask, and weakly, thinly singing, a cappella, a Madonna song that runs “I hear you call my name/And it feels like home...” The crying girl buries her Gothically smeared face in her stuffed tiger and screams “shit,

goddam, motherfucker.” Then she sings another line, “when you call my name/It’s like a little prayer...” only to be interrupted in her fragile vulnerability by a family member yelling “Shut up!” Other girls are shown in their private home spaces where friends are backstabbing, where emotional ugliness abounds and families are falling apart.

After Reeder has established this unpromising content of everyday life, just as Benning had in *Landscape Suicide*, the scene of the suddenly unified young women singing a professionally rehearsed song is visited upon the viewer as a multi-layered surprise. The perfect harmonies of the chorus are a reversal of the characterization of all these girls as defeated, alienated, trivial, cynical, and mean; a reversal of their seeming powerlessness; a replacement of their seeming callowness with maturity and sophistication; an amplification of their neo-cryptic, post-millennial, texting gibberish into traditional aesthetic and spiritual grace; and a translation of their chosen music from male—Judas Priest⁹—to female, and from raucous and raw to balanced and refined, while at the same time remaining, in its own way, as tough as heavy metal. It is a triumph of accessible alternative cinema that Reeder has worked rhetorically to deliver.

DURATION, MELODRAMA, AND MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

Reeder’s film dispenses little or no sentimentality in its depiction of this sublime moment, thereby avoiding the common tendency of mainstream cinema to dilute sublime experience through exaggerated sentimentality and melodrama.¹⁰ The opening moments of *A Million Miles Away* include the line, spoken by a high school girl, “You need to look fear in the face,” and that is what the girls in the chorus do in their extended performance of the Judas Priest song. In commandeering the gaze, the girls hold the attention of the insecure teacher and force her to look her fear in the face. And though it is much shorter than that employed by Benning in *Ruhr*, Reeder’s held cinematic gaze still yields surprises with specific payoffs.

The scenes above in fact share the stylistic feature of a kind of duration that holds the viewer’s gaze over time. Benning of course is famous for his prosthetically held gazes. The sublimity of the *Ruhr* scene depends on the extreme duration of the shot—the single take starts in the afternoon and finishes an hour later, after dark, like Warhol’s even longer epic, *Empire*. Single-take duration is also a defining feature of Benning’s “Memory” scene in *Landscape Suicide*. Reeder’s scene in *A Million Miles Away* works similarly, using duration to deliver an intensity grounded in authenticity, owing to Reeder’s closeness to her tough-girl characters, whether as versions of Reeder’s former self or as versions of the new generation of women filmmakers she now teaches at the University of Illinois in Chicago.¹¹ Drawing on her past and present experience, Reeder stares down the reality of working-class, teenaged girlhood, and forces the viewer to do the same. During discussion after the screening of *A Million*

Miles Away at the Wexner Center at the Ohio State University in Columbus in 2014, Reeder said that, during editing, when she was queried by her expert editors about the length of the chorus scene, she insisted on running the entire song. I should think so, since that is the carefully prepared pinnacle of the film, the facing of the music.

Speaking of music, melodrama is worth mentioning in the context of Reeder’s accomplishment because some of the sublime effect of *A Million Miles Away* comes from Reeder’s misprision of male purview in both film and music. For one thing, Reeder ends the girls in her film with the weapons of male narrative melodrama.¹² These girls are as tough as Charles Bronson or Clint Eastwood. They consider naming their rock band “Beaver Fever” or “Hatchet Wound.” They wear lipsticks with names like “Bloodbath.” Also, on the *female*-oriented end of the melodrama spectrum, Reeder includes an older woman who, like the middle-aged protagonist in a weepy such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945), is disrespected by a man. In *A Million Miles Away*, however, the older woman in Reeder’s film has received from her boyfriend a disrespectful text message in trendy jargon that she cannot understand; she doesn’t even know she’s been had until the girls matter-of-factly decode the semantic situation for her. The fearfulness that raises this film to the level of the sublime, comes from, not the worthless man and not the wronged older woman, but rather the self-empowered, super-competent, esoterically-skilled younger women, who have appeared to be merely mean schoolgirls getting in the face of their teacher’s helplessness.

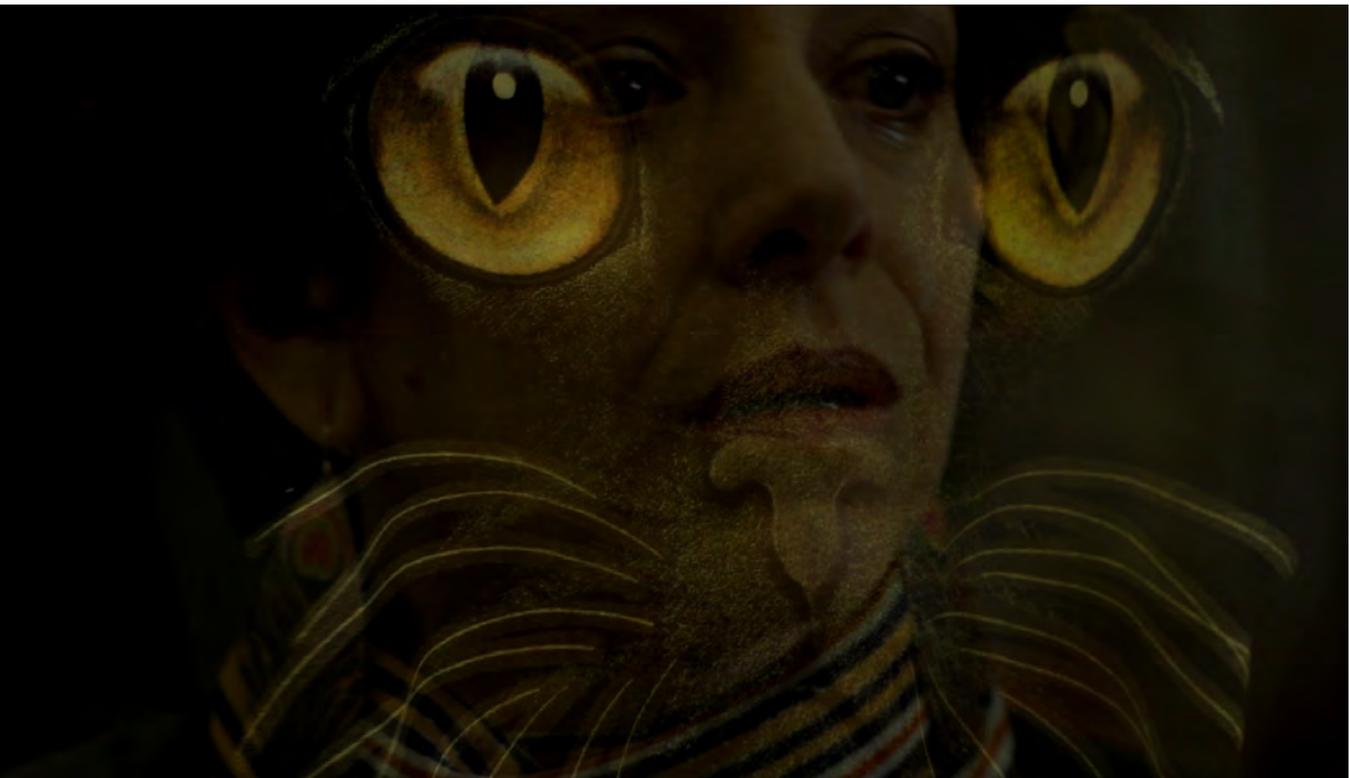
The girls disdainfully bait and bully the teacher. But, Reeder shows that their fearsomeness toward the world comes from their own experience in the trenches, from their own predicaments as 21st-century girls. They are not about to be duped by a man the way Mildred Pierce was in the 1940s, or the way their substitute teacher is now being duped. The girls are tough, though they do also feel hurt and they do still cling to their stuffed animals, lollypops, and little-girl paraphernalia. Their premature makeup becomes Goth when they talk or cry to themselves in various efforts to face their own private damage.

Their pain establishes the background tone for the formidable instrument that they are to become, and melodramatic suffering motivates the threatening attitude that helps raise their chorus into the sublime. When the mean girls sing together, the pure a cappella tones drill into the viewer’s mind like a Dream Syndicate drone or a Sunn O))) sonic attack. Such associations are derivable from the harmonies in *A Million Miles Away*, harmonies that bear the Kantian characteristics of “textural scale, overwhelming complexity, and awe-inspiring dread.” Their saturated sonic strength, founded in the visions of Gothic pain in the girls’ backstories, lifts the resultant chorus out of the ordinary to a sublime place a million miles away from the institutional scene.

Reeder’s success in conjuring the sublime from a scene of choral performance could be associated with the history of collective choral singing in political movements, such as Protestant



Jennifer Reeder, *A Million Miles Away* (2014), frame enlargements.



Jennifer Reeder, *A Million Miles Away* (2014), frame enlargements.

hymnody in 16th-century Europe and Black spirituals in the 20th-century American civil rights movement.¹³ The choral sublime has been resurgent in urban America recently with the rise of organizations such as the Boston Children's Chorus, the one-thousand-voice Columbus Harmony Project, and David Lang's "the public domain" performed by a thousand singers outside Lincoln Center as part of the Mostly Mozart Festival in 2016. Perhaps more relevant to Reeder's work is the explicitly aggressive *Toxic Psalms* (2015), a theatrical work by the Slovenian vocal ensemble Carmina Slovenica, a female chorus led by Karmina Silec, which also features young female performers, a Gothic mise-en-scene, and the harmonizing and dramatizing of collective social action (on YouTube, the trailer for *Toxic Psalms* is sub-titled "Ultimate Collective Experience").¹⁴ Despite such connections, however, Reeder's deployment of the social and harmonic chorale distinguishes itself from these examples. Reeder's girls are not just a competent collective force; they are also self-organized and distrustful of institutional authority. While the Harmony Project and Lang's "public domain" are socially-progressive projects for large diverse audiences, Reeder's mean-girl chorus is a 21st-century Lavender Menace.¹⁵ And while the female performances in *Toxic Psalms* and *A Million Miles Away* both articulate female bonding and no-nonsense personal attitude in their aggressive styles and in their lyrics, in Reeder's film, the menacing lyrics are appropriated from a song by an all-male group, "You've Got Another Thing Comin'":

Oh so hot, no time to take a rest...
 Act tough, ain't room for second best
 Real strong, got me some security
 Hey I'm a big smash, I'm goin' for infinity...¹⁶

Reeder's misprision of masculine pop-music aggression and drone brings us to the brink of, not mere transgression, but Kant's "dynamical sublime," the "experience [of the] fearful while knowing ourselves to be in a position of safety." Kant's own examples of this sort of sublime—overhanging cliffs, thunderclouds—are replaced with awesome girls.

SUBLIME EDUCATION AND THE SCENE OF INSTRUCTION

Following the work of earlier experimental filmmakers who took aim at the sublime through avant-garde techniques such as abstraction, montage, flicker, and duration, Reeder has found a way, through experimental narrative film, to again deploy

the power of the sublime that drives some of the best of artists' moving-image work. In Reeder's film, as the nervous teacher directly faces the confident, hatchet-wounded Pussy Riot that confronts her—the classroom chorus singing their finely tuned, defiant lyrics in celestial harmony—the older woman gradually stops conducting that chorus and then weeps. When the girls see this, they interrogate her, then decode her symptoms and diagnose her problem; and—true to their Judith Priestly song—they advise her how to fight. We suspect that this teacher has what it takes to follow their battle-hardened advice, partly because of her tee shirt, which features the glowing yellow eyes of a cat, and which conjures, for me, the strong women and girls in another little-girl, big-girl film, *Curse of the Cat People* (1944).

This teacher's latent capacity for change in the face of the sublime—signaled by those daunting cat's eyes—is important to the idea of the sublime proposed here. A number of theorists of the sublime, including Kant, emphasize the developmental nature of the sublime experience, when the mind or soul of the viewer is enlarged through coping with previously unimagined and unexpected greatness.¹⁷ In a telling moment of *A Million Miles Away* that speaks to this dilation of the soul, the larger cat's eyes of the teacher's tee shirt are superimposed on her crying face as her spirit swells. As this effect suggests, Reeder's film transcends the institutional scene of instruction and redefines education as a Kantian experience.

That *A Million Miles Away* leads us via the sublime through education to empowerment is the point of the film, and it is also a signal purpose of artists' cinema. In addition to being an experimental filmmaker, Reeder is, in her day job, a film teacher and thus often stands, like the substitute teacher in her film, in front of classes of students like the girls in this film's chorus. What might we now imagine that Reeder feels when confronted with such awesomeness? Reeder's response to consolidated awesomeness is resonant in the way Cormac McCarthy's is resonant to the running of wild horses: ". . . and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid neither horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised."¹⁸ In the presence of the collective sublime, Reeder raises her own voice in resonant praise.

Notes and citations are online at <http://www.mfj-online.org/green-praise-girls-notes/>