

An Aesthetics of the Unbearable

The Cult of Masculinity and the Sublime in Ernst Jünger's "Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis" (Battle as an Inner Experience)

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Résumé

Cet article examine la structure de l'« expérience » dans l'essai d'Ernst Jünger « La guerre comme expérience intérieure ». À partir de ses expériences de guerre, Jünger invoque la nécessité d'une esthétique de l'intolérable. Cette esthétique est systématiquement mise en rapport avec la tradition philosophique du sublime, développée au cours de l'antiquité (notamment par Pseudo-Longinus) et de la modernité (par Burke et Kant). En même temps, l'esthétique de l'expérience de Jünger s'accompagne d'un culte en apparence homophile de la masculinité.

Abstract

This article analyses the structure of "experience" in Ernst Jünger's essay "Battle as an inner experience". Based on his war experiences, Jünger posits the necessity of an aesthetics of the unbearable. This aesthetics is systematically connected with the philosophical tradition of the sublime developed in antiquity (by e.g. Pseudo-Longinus) and modernity (by e.g. Burke and Kant). At the same time Jünger's aesthetics of experience generates an apparent homophile cult of masculinity.

Keywords

Ernst Jünger, war & the aesthetics of unbearable violence, antique and modern concepts of the sublime, homophile cult of masculinity

I.

Quoting another author's text does not necessarily have to be a gesture of reverential affection. It can even contain a certain "violence" (Frey 151), as it is demonstrated by Ernst Jünger quoting Stendhal's *On Love* (1822) in his essay collection *Das abenteuerliche Herz* (The Adventurous Heart) from 1929:

"Aimer c'est avoir du plaisir à voir, toucher, sentir par tous les sens et d'aussi près que possible, un objet aimable et qui nous aime" (*De l'Amour*). You might be able to find this in a Prussian regulation about how to attack fortresses – I am able to be a judge of that, because as a member of the commission to set up the new rules and regulations, I have perhaps already made a modest contribution to the next war. (*Das abenteuerliche Herz* 113)

At first glance, it seems a rather daring leap from Stendhal's romantic tone to Jünger's commentary about war. Applying Stendhal's definition of love to the art of attacking fortresses seems to turn the meaning of the quotation upside down. At the same time, Jünger's comment is a variation of the long-standing theme of the "equivalence of love and war": "in both cases," writes Roland Barthes, "it is a matter of *conquering, ravishing, capturing, etc.*" (188). Jünger's provocation thus solely consists in reversing the direction of the metaphorical substitution and in talking of war as a game of love (rather than of love as an act of war).

This gesture seems characteristic of Jünger's writings about war. In a passage in his 1922 essay "Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis" (Battle as an Inner Experience), he also draws the long-established parallel between love and war: "[T]he sight of the enemy produces not only the most extreme horror, but also relief from heavy, unbearable pressure. The lust of blood hangs over the war like a red storm-sail over a black galley: in its boundless momentum it is comparable only to love" (19). Here, the comparison is drawn at a different level. The point is no longer, as in Jünger's *Das abenteuerliche Herz*, to posit a metaphorical relationship between the art of war and the art of love, but to draw a literal "comparison" between the "lust of blood" and "love" in its explicitly physical form.

In the following, I would like to explore the configuration of war and love by taking a closer look at "Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis" – a text that has so far received little attention by scholars. First, I will discuss the significance of the term "experience" in Jünger's text, connecting it with the tradition of the sublime. Second, I will try to show – based on the gender configuration that is already inherent in the tradition of the sublime – that Jünger's text is, in fact, rather interested in restructuring gender dispositions than in establishing an aesthetics of war.

II.

The title of Ernst Jünger's autobiographical essay from 1922 – battle as an inner experience – is rather striking and already hints at key propositions of the text. As Yuval Harari comments, the phrase "inner experience" is tautological only "at first glance" (58): the actual aim is to describe a radically different

way of undergoing events – or external actions – that differs from traditional patterns of experience. Re-defining the boundaries of experiencing is a characteristic that places Jünger’s text squarely in the intellectual context of his times. “Since the end of the last century,” Walter Benjamin summarizes in his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” “philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of the ‘true’ experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses” (156). Benjamin names *Dilthey’s Poetry and Experience* and Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* as examples of the attempt to describe an “experience” that is not industrially standardized.

Jünger’s emphatic notion of “experience” inscribes itself into these philosophical approaches. In his essay on “The Storyteller,” Benjamin names the reality of “mechanical warfare” as a reason why war could no longer generate “experience”: “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience?”, he writes (143-144). The unbearable reality of war can no longer be translated into communicable experience. For Jünger, on the other hand, it is the bloody novelty of the First World War that gives way to and also forces a radically new notion of experience, which then also goes hand in hand with a new textual and rhetorical strategy. Jünger does not return silent “from the battlefield.” On the contrary, for him war necessitates nothing less than a rebirth of man, warrior, and author. From his point of view, this not only applies to him personally, but to his entire generation – and in order to depict this rebirth Jünger coins a heavily visual and violent language. “War has made people and their times what they are,” he begins, segueing into the apparently inevitable reference to Heraclitus: “War is the father of all things, including of us” (“Der Kampf” 13). This is a sentence that has also been cited and slightly modified by Nietzsche,¹ so obviously Jünger is still holding on to the tradition of philosophy. However, he continues with and expands on the metaphor of fatherhood:

And always, as long as the swinging wheel of life is still turning inside us, war will be the axis around which it swirls. War has raised us to fight, and we will remain fighters as long as we live. ... Don’t you see how its flame burns in the eyes of every single one of us? Sometimes, it may be asleep, but when the earth trembles, it erupts burning-hot from all volcanoes. But war is not only our father, it is also our son. We have begotten him and he has begotten us. We have been hammered and chiseled, but we also wield the hammer and the chisel, we are both smith and flashing steel. (“Der Kampf” 14)

The different aspects of fatherhood mentioned are entirely masculine. A male father “begets” and “raises” male posterity (“son,” “fighters”); there is no reference to mothers or daughters. It is thus a fantasy of self-procreation in the name of a warriorship cleansed of the female body (Öhlschläger 350f.). The image of the volcano – especially in connection with the word “erupt” – explicitly refers to masculine sexuality, interpreting it as a brutal and destructive force of nature. Via the “‘flame’ [that] burns in the eyes of every single one of us,” the image of the erupting volcano is translated to the human world, although it is unclear whether the volcano functions as a metaphor of male force or whether human violence serves as a metaphor for the destructiveness of the volcano. This ambivalence is constitutive

1. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes: “War is the father of all good things, war is also the father of good prose!” (92)

of the ‘exchange logic’ of Jünger’s text: the “fighter” is both a product of war – “its spirit has infiltrated its forced laborers, never releasing them from their duty” – and, for all times, also its begetter – “And once it [i.e. war] is inside of us, it is everywhere, because we are shaping the world” (“Der Kampf” 14).

In Volume 2 of *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit has extensively described the relationship between the cult of masculinity, an aesthetics that glorifies war, and a barely veiled homophilia in texts about the First World War and from the National Socialist era. Theweleit tries to posit something like a “homosexual fantasy” (241) in the male-bonding world of National Socialism – which shows itself through actual homosexual acts as well as through the manifestation of a homo-erotic symbolic world. At first glance, the cult of masculinity in Jünger’s “Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis” seems to fit well into these discourses of male bonding. At second glance, however, it becomes clear that the question whether Jünger’s text expresses the author’s latent homosexuality – quite apart from the highly ideological problem of categorizing “the homosexual”² – fails to acknowledge the complexity of the construction of “experience” in Jünger’s text. In particular, it is the aesthetic construction of this category that gets lost. What I am suggesting is that Jünger’s text deliberately and firmly places itself in the philosophical and literary tradition of the sublime, and that both the construction of “experience” and the cult of masculinity can be explained by this reference to the sublime.

In Jünger’s text, the word “sublime” only appears twice, in two sentences in the same passage from the chapter on “courage.” Here, Jünger first talks about the “sublime language of power that to us sounds more beautiful and intoxicating than anything that has come before” (54). A few sentences later, he writes about the experience of war: “But there was something sublime about the fact that, as soon as we heard the signal to attack, hardly a person stayed behind. Those who jumped out of the trenches were overcomers; hence also the equanimity and calm with which they walked through the fire” (55).

Here, the reference to the sublime is taking place at the terminological level and corresponds to the conception of the sublime in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In the section about the “dynamically sublime,” Kant mentions, among other things, “volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult” (125) as examples of the force and violence of a nature that is, at any time, capable of physically destroying men. In this context, Kant defines as sublime man’s “faculty of judging independently of, and a superiority over, nature,” on which is based a “kind of self-preservation, entirely different from that which can be attacked and brought into danger by external nature” (125-126). For Kant, the sublime is thus essentially man’s capacity to see himself as not just a *physical* being. When faced with his total physical powerlessness and destruction, a “power” is “called up” in man “which is not nature” (126). Man recognizes himself as a rational being who by virtue of his mind is capable of elevating himself, even above his physical destruction. In this context, Kant notes that even “war itself, if it is carried on with order and with a sacred respect for the rights of citizens, has something sublime in it” (127).

Jünger’s description of warriors as “overcomers” points to this constitutive ability to take an affirmative attitude towards one’s own death. For Jünger, a soldier is somebody who, “through his

2. See Foucault 43: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”

death, acknowledges that he thinks of his idea as something bigger than himself” (“Der Kampf” 57). Emphasizing that it plays no role at all what this idea is or what it aims at, Jünger posits that the only thing that matters is *having* an idea and being willing to die for it. “Not *what* we fight *for*, but *how* we fight is what counts” (78), he writes, continuing: “Cause is nothing, conviction everything. Even he who dies obsessed with an obviously wrong idea has given his all” (105).

But the affirmation of one’s own death is not the only reason why Jünger’s text bears a structural affinity with the tradition of the sublime. “Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis” also contains a multitude of motifs, topics, and structures that refer to the sublime. These include, first of all, topographical motifs such as the volcano and the ocean (the polar sea) that permeate the entire tradition of the sublime, from Burke all the way to Kant.³ In Jünger’s text, the soldiers in the trenches of the First World War appear as “a group of men cast out at night, a ship’s crew with icebergs towering over and around them” (30); later, Jünger compares the warriors with the “last survivors of a badly damaged ship,” who “go down singing and fighting” (56). The landscapes of war are “twitching deserts” (23), unearthly, endless empty spaces devoid of people and hostile to life. “Where was one? Somewhere on the crater fields of the moon? After all, this couldn’t be a landscape on earth” (23). In Jünger’s texts, war dissolves all spatial boundaries and all that is left is an “oceanic feeling” (Theweleit 185). The spatial experience of the sublime hints at a view of the world from the perspective of a dead person, if not death itself: “Space dissolves into bleak infinity, and I feel like a tiny atom, tirelessly spun around by treacherous forces” (“Der Kampf” 71). For Jünger, the motifs of the sublime always appear as human products (of war), not as natural products: “Man” is he who, in war, is “like a raging storm, a booming ocean, and roaring thunder” (57), and thus becomes a source of the sublime.

Secondly, the structures and motifs of the sublime include a rhetoric of maximum exaggeration (Ehlers 73),⁴ which is in keeping with Kant’s definition of the sublime as being “*great beyond all comparison*” (*Critique* 106). What matters for Jünger is the “climax of war” (“Der Kampf” 37) and the ensuing “intensification of power, of which man is capable” (54). Thirdly, these structures and motifs include – and this is an element of both Longinos’ classical doctrine of the sublime⁵ and Kant’s modern definition – an ethics of enthusiasm, mindless intoxication: “Here,” Jünger writes, “masculinity gets carried away by enthusiasm to the extent that the blood boils in one’s veins and in one’s heart. This is the mother of all intoxications, an unleashing that bursts all chains” (57).

All these signs in Jünger’s texts can be related to masculinity as a central signifier. The affinity with death, the intensification of power, the enthusiasm: for Jünger, all of these point to “male courage” (38, 56), “virile courage” – which is “after all, the most exquisite thing” (52) –, “manhood at its most masculine” (38), “chivalry” (53), “a clanging re-birth of barbarism” (38), “adventurers’ blood” (62), “fighters’ daring” (75), and the “purest warrior spirit” (55). Accordingly, the text’s imagery is replete with more or less explicitly phallic symbols and images. The already cited image of war that “erupts”

3. On the motif of the ocean, see, e.g., Burke 43.

4. See Ehlers 73: “The sublime makes use of the boundary, it overwhelms the subject’s abilities, whether they be sensory or imaginative. As an aesthetic liminal experience, it represents the opening towards an absolute.”

5. See Longinus 14-15: “For I would confidently pronounce that nothing is so conducive to sublimity as an appropriate display of genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of fine madness and divine inspiration, and falls on our ears like the voice of a god.”

from “all volcanoes” (14) corresponds with the fire “erupting” from the machine gun (“Hey, how it erupts!” (51), Jünger writes); the “swelling flood” of “numbing noises” (78) at the front also refers to the “red blood,” which, several pages later, “shoots forth from a burning wound” (67) in an almost ejaculatory manner. Both images build “shimmering temples to the phallus” (39).

Erotic and martial images ultimately become completely exchangeable, as is shown by a crude image bordering on the pornographic which Jünger uses in two passages in his text. “What drunken laughter there was when the metallic hilt sank deep into white flesh” (42), he writes in a chapter entitled “Eros” about the sexual encounters behind the frontline. Several pages later, he writes, in a chapter about combat, that “the sound of a piece of iron hacking into soft human flesh could be heard loud and clear” (95). *Metal* phallically penetrates *flesh*, and the consonance, in the German original, of “white (*weißem*) flesh” on the one hand and “soft (*weichem*) human flesh” on the other makes the passages almost rhyme, although one would be at a loss to say which sphere serves as a metaphorical substitute for the other.

The signifier of masculinity, which is so central to Jünger’s text, too can be considered as belonging to the discourses of the sublime – especially in the eighteenth century. The sublime is also always a discourse about male heroism (van Marwyck 48-61). In eighteenth-century aesthetic doctrines, the difference between “beautiful” and “sublime” implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) correlated with the differences between women and men, most explicitly in Kant’s 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, where he writes that the “merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful,” while “among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands as the criterion of his kind” (76-77).

Previous studies have rarely connected Jünger’s literary spelling-out of this cult of masculinity, its affinity with death and the related term of “experience” with the tradition of the sublime.⁶ A number of the above-mentioned motifs and structures have been discussed in the context of an aesthetics of terror or an aesthetics of intensity (Bohrer 75ff.). But when one analyzes the text’s key structures, motifs, and topics – that is, basically Jünger’s representation of the war as a whole – in connection with the tradition of the sublime, we can see a compelling link between the topics of masculinity and death and that of “experience”: both meet at the point where the maximum terror and “horror” produce a situation that makes the “warrior” who he is and that can only be presented and communicated by him.

In §29 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines the sublime as an “object (of nature) *the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of Ideas*” (134). The sublime relates to the presentation of ideas *by virtue of negation*: Kant explicitly talks about “negative presentation” (143). What he means is the paradoxical constellation that the absolute inability – the destruction of every power, every ability – to present, make visible and phenomenologically understandable an idea makes it possible for the powers of the imagination to achieve this presentation, if only, however, in an exclusively “negative” way. The sublime, notes Jan Assmann, “is the unnamable, the unspeakable, that which transcends language” (192).

In Ernst Jünger’s “Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,” the unrepresentability of “experience” is subsumed under the notion of “horror.” The war is translated into an aesthetics of the unbearable:

6. A notable exception is Hoffmann 270ff.

unbearable for ordinary people, war can only be suffered, experienced, and communicated by warriors. “To be true, there are only a select few who experienced the war in such an intense manner, but the spirit of an era is, after all, always captured and carried forward by a few only” (40), writes Jünger: Only the warriors bear the unbearable. In a passage about “horror,” Jünger talks about different kinds and aspects of representing the utmost terror. First, he talks about the technical reproduction of horror in the “entertainment” medium:

At places where the people are looking for intensified life, at every fair, every shooting range, the horror beckons on a brightly painted canvas. Sex murders, executions, wax bodies covered by festering sores, rows and rows of anatomical monstrosities: those who put these things on display know the masses and fill their pockets. (21)

The fair, too, is thus a site where the unbearable (“horror,” “monstrosities”) takes place. There, the technical reproduction of “horror” functions through iconic representation (“painted canvas”), for the purposes of entertainment (“intensified life,” “display”) and for the sake of profit (“fill their pockets”). Recipients and consumers of this kind of horror are the “people” and the “masses”: a shapeless, all-inclusive collectivity.

Compare to this the totally different “experience” of horror at the war front. Following Jünger’s proposition that the experience of war had led to the rebirth of a whole generation, the horror of war seems accessible only to a select few and can be told only by those who have seen it with their own eyes: “Who may speak of war who was not inside our ring?” (25), he asks. Jünger’s text thus erects a ban on representation, which corresponds to the Jewish prohibition of images, which Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, defines as the ultimate sublime: “Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish law than the command, *Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything which is in heaven or on the earth or under the earth, etc.*” (143). Because Jünger himself writes “as a warrior” (“Der Kampf” 52) but has to address readers who are not “inside the ring” and who are not warriors – and readership can be, by nature, potentially feminine –, he has to find a language that goes beyond a pure and complete prohibition of visual and verbal presentations of the sublime. Thus, unsurprisingly he ends up with literature:

Why should I spare your nerves? Were we not lying for four days in a tunnel way among corpses? Were we not all, both the dead and the living, covered with a thick carpet of big black-and-blue flies? Could it be worse than that? ... Who can tell? Only a poet, a poète maudit in the lusty hell of his dreams. / Et dites-moi s’il est encore quelque torture / Pour ce vieux corps sans âme et mort parmi les morts? (25)⁷

There thus exist two fundamentally opposite forms of representing “horror,” which are juxtaposed in Jünger’s text. The technical reproduction of horror in the medium of the image for the masses is first

7. The French quotation is taken from Baudelaire’s poem “Le Mort Joueux” (The Joyful Corpse) in *Flowers of Evil*: “And tell me if there still remains any torture / For this old soulless body, dead among the dead!” (223)

devalued by a representation prohibition which itself takes its cue from the tradition of the sublime. To this is juxtaposed the individual experience of horror via the medium of the narrative, which can be “told” no longer in declarative sentences, but in self-negating questions (which exactly fail to tell). The contrast between the experience of the invariably frivolous “masses” – “There is only one mass of people that doesn’t look ridiculous: the army” (59), Jünger writes – and the “experience” of the “warrior” who is isolated because of his permanent proximity to death and at home only in the community of the dying, is here undergirded by an implicit media theory: the people – the masses – look at images (visual signs), while the isolated individual uses language and writes (arbitrary, abstract signs).

To the image is juxtaposed the word, and the narrative’s inability to visualize the horror makes it the adequate medium for the unbearable aesthetics of war. The reference to literary symbolism (to the Baudelaire poem) finally makes it possible to dissolve the distinction between image and story, inasmuch as it introduces a visuality into the text, which, however, in the question mode, negates any illusion of a transparent reference to a reality beyond language. Wholly in keeping with the aesthetics of the sublime, Jünger’s text thus marks itself off against the image in a double way. The technical image, which promises an immediate representation of reality, is disparaged as a medium for entertaining the masses. The visual dimension of language too is dismissed and classed with an out-of-date tradition: “The trenches leave no room for lyrical contemplation or reverence for one’s own greatness,” Jünger writes (33). For Jünger, the only suitable representations of war are, at best, “poems of steel,” where “the material speaks its iron language” (107). Jünger’s text throughout refers to the need for a different language that the text itself is unable to represent, but is at least able to suggest. “The words attain a hidden meaning, break through the surface and immediately bring about an understanding of the depths that have been closed off forever,” he writes about the language in the trenches. “One’s feelings flow around a different point of gravity, one gropes one’s way through the horror” (97). Of course, at this point he also refers to his own literary language, which constantly emphasizes its immediate origins in the trenches of war. Beyond any semantic reference, the ideal language of the warrior works only because of its “hidden meaning” and causes an “immediate” understanding, which unlocks the deep, locked-up horror, so that it can be experienced. Thus, the implicit media theory in Jünger’s text continually refers back to the aesthetics of the sublime and the doctrine of the unbearable and inaccessible experience that it unfolds.

Walter Benjamin has argued that the concept of true “experience” demanded by the philosophers of life can only be realized in the realm of literature: “*Matière et mémoire* defines the nature of experience in the *durée* in such a way that the reader is bound to conclude that only a poet can be the adequate subject of such an experience” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 157). This judgment is also reinforced by Ernst Jünger’s search for the “battle as an inner experience.” The paradox of Jünger’s assertion that literature can absolutely describe the singularity and indescribability of “horror,” thus actually denying its singularity, is evident not only in this passage, but becomes apparent throughout when analyzing Jünger’s text in relation to the tradition of the sublime.

Translated by Manuela Thurner

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