



Framing the sublime as affect in post-disaster tourism

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ABSTRACT

This article frames dark tourism experiences employing the geographical concept of sublime-as-affect. We contend that the sublime has features that allow us to analyse it as an affect, an intensity of feeling that circulates in-between bodies, which can be experienced poignantly in places of death, and lead to transformative experiences. By presenting accounts of tourism-related stakeholders in post-disaster Tohoku, Japan, devastated by an earthquake, a tsunami, and a nuclear meltdown, we overview moments in which the sublime-as-affect is experienced. Findings suggest that while the dilapidated and abandoned landscapes of Tohoku evoke a negative representation, they also demonstrate a potential for generating transformative affects, which can become a vehicle for meaning in post-disaster tourism encounters.

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Introduction

On May 25th, 2016, I (the first author) crossed for the first time the border of the exclusion zone around the leaking Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant to reach Tomioka High School, where a group of Japanese researchers was developing a 3D-mapping project. A sign informed me and my travel companion, a technician at Tohoku University Museum, that we had reached the contaminated area. We found no roadblocks or police patrolling the area, only big radiation exposure counters every few kilometres, to remind us that this was no normal trip to the Japanese countryside. Once outside the abandoned school, I was left to my own devices and started exploring. I did not touch anything if I could avoid it, but not because of a fear of radiation. The clocks did not work, and class calendars were still set in March 2011. The atmosphere felt unreal, suspended; only a thick layer of dust showed the passing of time. Some desks and chairs were upright, some tipped-over. In a classroom, gym bags and jackets were lined up at the back, still hanging from their hooks, while at the front I could see a fish tank. Up to this day and including the subsequent visits I did in the exclusion zone, what made the strongest impression on me was the memory of peeking in the abandoned tank. The cover had fallen and the water had completely evaporated. In a corner, I could see the tiny skeleton of a fish covered in dust. That image remained with me as a memento of an uncomfortable, uncanny feeling I could not grasp back then.

I had a similar feeling in the much northern tsunami-hit towns of the Miyagi and Iwate prefectures, which were severely damaged but not impacted by the nuclear disaster, nor evacuated. It took me two more visits to the exclusion zone, and many more to tsunami-hit towns, to understand what weighed on me. In the disaster-hit towns far from radiation, the physical landscape was

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profoundly changed, and most buildings were destroyed. However, people were still there, working on the reconstruction and moving on with their lives. It was with the appearance of a material memento –a dilapidated building, a monument, or a glimpse of the Ocean, that suddenly I would be transported to the past, feeling the magnitude of it, the impossibility of fully escaping these burdensome memories. The towns surrounding the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant further from the coast such as Tomioka, that were not swept away by the tsunami, were still intact but devoid of life. Only decontamination workers, figures in white overalls, were sometimes visible. Otherwise, the towns still looked lived in, if unkempt, as if the residents had disappeared into thin air.

These experiences sparked in me, for different reasons, feelings of wonder and disbelief, mixed with eerie dread. In literary studies, this fleeting yet powerful feeling is defined as ‘sublime’. The concept of sublime has been applied to geography to define certain features and aesthetic characteristics of landscapes, events, as well as cultural transformations in society and science. In broad terms, the sublime is experienced when a person is confronted with something that goes beyond the ordinary, the size or magnitude of which surpasses all possibilities of calculation, measurement, or imitation which elicits both awe and terror (Shaw, 2006).

In this article, we (I and the 2nd author) argue that analysing instances of sublime feelings from a geographies of affect perspective overcomes certain limitations of phenomenological approaches in understanding dark tourism experiences and gives new insights into the processes of construction and management of such places. The concept of the sublime has features that allow us to reconsider it and analyse it as an affect, an intensity of feeling that circulates in-between bodies (human and non-human), and in the variations between these intensities. Affects are volatile, difficult to represent and put into words, but can be perceived consciously in the right circumstances. Based on primary data collected in the exclusion zone of Fukushima and along the coastal area of Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures, we analyse how moments of sublime are perceived, narrated, and negotiated by international tourists and tourism workers in post-disaster Tohoku, and how this can create a transformative experience for tourists and locals involved in tourism.

Searching for sublime moments

The category of ‘sublime’ has been previously associated with dark tourism (Goatcher & Brunnsden, 2011; Skinner, 2018; Stone, 2013); literature and media studies (Day, 2013; Jameson, 2009); and geographical work (Olwig, 2015; Sage, 2016). However, academics have concentrated on either the relationship of the sublime with affect, or its relationship with dark tourism, rarely acknowledging both connections at the same time, and thus overlooking the potential of analyses of affective moments to interpret the transformative potential of dark tourism encounters. In this section, we discuss how the sublime has been historically interpreted across the disciplines of philosophy and psychology (Burke, 1844; Hegel, 1998; Kant, 1951; Lacan, 1966; Lacan & Fink, 2006; Žižek, 1989). Besides the concept of the sublime in the poetry of English romantic writers, the philosophical and psychological ideas of sublime as conceptualized by these scholars were used in multiple disciplines, including geography (Castree, 2004; McGill, 2000; Tuan, 2013). These definitions and interpretations are necessary to analyse as they trickled down and contributed to the framing of the sublime in geography. We look at the shortcomings of these interpretations of the sublime and how the sublime-as-affect fills the gap and potentially reframes aspects of the dark tourism experience. The sublime refers to places and events that evoke an overwhelming sensation of excitement, grandeur and terror (Jaeger, 2012), a moment when the ability to know and to express is defeated and the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond human comprehension (Shaw, 2006). It is often framed as a sudden awareness grounded in places and events that in their vastness allow a glimpse of something otherworldly, a ‘thread of the divine’ (Bloom & Hobby, 2010) inaccessible through words and rationalised emotions.

The sublime has the potential to be apprehended in all its grandness and terror in tourism places related to death, disaster and atrocities, which in academia are labeled as dark tourism sites (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Dark tourism has become a brand (Stone, 2013), an umbrella term in academia and popular media to define a sub-field of tourism studies. It highlights a relationship between tourism and death, and covers a vast array of places, contexts, events, motivations, and taxonomies (Light, 2017). For this reason, the borders and boundaries of the field remain unclear (Martini & Buda, 2020). Often, academics also refer to this field of enquiry using the term “thanatourism”. While these terms are used interchangeably, we prefer the broad denomination “dark tourism”. Thanatourism emphasizes death and its representations as cornerstone of the touristic experience, and includes both historical and current sites (Seaton, 1996). Dark tourism, on the other hand, focuses on contemporary sites and is informed by an understanding of tourism as a recent phenomenon –in this specific form, reach, and pervasiveness (Foley & Lennon, 1996). While the dark tourism “catchphrase” has been adopted as well as misinterpreted by media outlets, it remains the label that best encapsulated the complexities and contradictions entailed in such experiences, which often moves beyond death-related motivations and experiences, to include instances of education, memory, and witnessing (Martini & Minca, 2021).

Disaster and post-disaster tourism are often considered sub-fields of dark tourism, in which the focus is not only on death, but also on the reconstruction, recovery, and resilience of the communities subject to calamities. Nuclear sites turned tourist attractions, such as the Chernobyl exclusion zone, are first encountered as a bodily exposure from an embodiment perspective (Rush-Cooper, 2020). So far, articles that have focused on tourism to disaster sites –including those on nuclear sites such as Hiroshima and Chernobyl (see Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Farić & Kennell, 2021; Goatcher & Brunnsden, 2011; Schäfer, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2016) seldom recognise the affective capacities of such places. However, while not directly engaging with the sublime, some authors acknowledge it as a sense of unrepresentable anxiety created by a “disenfranchisement of the senses” in places such as Chernobyl (Goatcher & Brunnsden, 2011), or as “eerie feeling of post-apocalyptic emptiness and meaninglessness” when describing artwork on Hiroshima (Farić & Kennell, 2021, 7). Critical analyses of case studies link dark tourism to issues of politics, ethics, spectacularisation of death (Stone, 2020) and to the recognition of body, senses and emotions (Porja et al., 2006) as crucial

part of the experience (Light, 2017). Although recent efforts also acknowledge affect as paramount in understandings, experiences and encounters in dark and disaster places (Martini & Minca, 2021; Podoshen, 2013), further research is needed.

The discourse of the sublime

The concept of sublime has undergone several re-interpretations across multiple disciplines since its inception, but it's generally understood as a characteristic of phenomena which appear either formless (a storm at sea; a vast mountain range) or which have form but, for reasons of size, exceed our ability to perceive such form (divinity, infinity), and apprehend it discursively (Ferguson, 2004). Debates on the features and general imaginary of the sublime have been shaped by several influential scholars across multiple disciplines (Burke, 1844; Hegel, 1998; Kant, 1951; Žižek, 1989). The Burkean sublime emphasizes the power of certain natural objects and phenomena to generate a visceral, passionate experience of terror and awe in the mind of the spectator (Shaw, 2006). For Kant, it engenders a feeling that is located in the mind of the one who judges, rather than any sensible object in nature (Merritt, 2012).

While Kant allows the idea that sublime could be used for natural elements, according to him when experiencing true sublimity we can take pleasure “in the failure of sensible representation because this failure enables us to appreciate the power of reason to conceive of what can never be met with in the senses” (Merritt, 2012, 39). Hegel, on the other hand, defined the sublime not as product of nature, but an ontology grounded “in something external to the subject: the one absolute substance, Spirit” (Lee, 2012, 45), that however cannot be apprehended as concrete. For Hegel, the sublime is a confrontation that results in a void, or absence, and a total lack of free will (Saxena, 1974). The philosophical definitions of the sublime by Kant and Hegel converge in the idea that it is in the negative relationship between finite nature and infinite Spirit that true sublimity is found (Lee, 2012).

Žižek (1989) undertakes a detailed comparison of the sublime under Kant and Hegel, ultimately siding with Hegel. Following Hegel, Žižek argues that the Kantian sublime is inadequate, as there exists a gap between phenomenological, empirical representation and what he defines as the “Thing-in-itself, or transcendental object” (Žižek, 1989, 203). Following Hegel, Žižek puts forth the concept of *sublime object*, acknowledging the potential for materiality of the sublime, and defining it as neither wholly mind nor wholly body, but an “immaterial corporeality” (Žižek, 1989, 18). According to Žižek (1989), if the Kantian sublime is a transcendent surplus beyond what can be represented, it can only imply something negative, that which escapes representation. However, if the field of representation is substituted by an “emptiness-in-being”, the drawbacks of the Kantian sublime can be overcome because now the sublime can be defined as an object that fills the emptiness with its presence (Žižek, 1989). Despite the differences, they all agree on the sublime's close relation to morality. The sublime is further described as having a transformative potential, in the sense that experiencing it in its negativity can encourage individuals towards the conduct of a more moral life, which is a life that adheres to the correct standards of conduct (Lee, 2012).

In the twentieth century, the World Wars, the Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima stimulated a shift in perspective, investing the sublime with a new status: no more as grandeur of nature, but as powerlessness in the face of terrible catastrophes (Presto, 2011), a marker of the insecurity of our place in the world (Day, 2013). The creation of the atomic bomb, as a man-made device, signals a paradigmatic shift from an environmental sublime (Brady, 2012) to a new era of man-made destruction. Such feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, and vulnerability overflowed into the political, social, and cultural life, on the one hand giving way to forms of mass tourism based on enjoyment, safety and relaxation in idyllic places, while on the other opening the possibility for new niche tourism ventures, often off-the-beaten track and engaging with the grit and darkness present in human experiences (dark tourism, but also volunteer tourism, and educational tourism). While visits to towns hit by the tsunami can provoke in visitors a sublime feeling elicited by a realization of the power of nature (or God, or Thing-in-Itself), the massive leakage at the Fukushima nuclear power plant evokes the idea of sublime in connection to a man-made event, reclaiming awe and terror that are even more grounded in negative space. The atomic bomb as a device has overwhelming, annihilating effects on the human body and the landscape (Masco, 2004). Nuclear destruction is considered a catalyst of sublimity because its magnitude cannot be seen, discussed, thought, or imagined (Ferguson, 1984). Paradoxically, however, tourism and heritage workers need to ask themselves how places of nuclear disaster are perceived by tourists and how they could be managed, narrated, and made sense of, so that the paralyzing, dreadful sublime event could be, even partly, “re-imagined, represented, and invoked” (Wilson, 1989) for tourism purposes.

Kant proposes that one way to bring to the surface a fraction of what is beyond representation could be ‘negative presentation’ (Kant, 1951), which embraces absence and empty spaces as a repository for the individual's imaginative power. As Ray explains, “the countless bowls, brushes, leather shoes, suitcases, and plundered personal effects” (Ray, 2005) displayed at the Auschwitz Memorial Museum, do not mean to represent but rather to evoke their owners and their fate through their absence. The same holds true for places of disaster. But as pointed out earlier, the Kantian sublime is a prisoner of the field of representation, and therefore, we argue that we can overcome this by framing negative presentations within the domain of geographies of affect. When strategies of (re)presentation fail to fully account for the magnitude of the event, it can create an uncomfortable feeling in which the audience is confronted with death, experiences catharsis, or the enormity of nature and its works as well as the inexpressible, spectacular capacity for violence of men (Day, 2013). The intensity with which a person can experience this ‘discomfort’ harbours the possibility of an affective charge that becomes part of our field of awareness perceiving an affective atmosphere so poignantly that, for a moment, the sublime comes into view (Jameson, 2009).

Sublime-as-affect in places of disaster

Affect, like dark tourism, does not have a univocal definition. It has been defined as attunement or atmosphere, but also as mood, passion, emotion, intensity, and feeling (Anderson, 2006), and qualifying as other-than-conscious, beyond complete

representation, not divorceable from emotions, thoughts, and body. Debates in the social sciences have pondered on whether affect and emotion constitute two different qualities of feeling, or whether they cannot be considered as separate entities. In this article, we support Sianne Ngai's understanding of affect as differing from emotion not in terms of quality, but intensity (Ngai, 2005). According to this perspective, affective intensities have the potential to be apprehended as emotions, when their intensity makes them perceivable in an array of forms and assemblages of feelings, atmospheres, and bodily actions and reactions. However, the emergent character of affect creates difficulties in upholding the theoretical distinction between emotions and affect empirically.

In phenomenological accounts of embodiment using the theory of affect, feelings may not primarily be localized within a single individual, but should rather be conceived as phenomena of a shared inter-corporeal space in which the interacting partners are involved, which he calls 'inter-affectivity' (Fuchs, 2016). This denotes certain similarities to what in the geographies of affect is defined as 'affective atmospheres', singular affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies (Anderson, 2009), in which the "ambiguities of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent" (Anderson, 2009, p. 77) coalesce and coexist in a dialectic form. When this framework is applied to dark tourism, it contributes to explaining how the living bodies of tourists and hosts are connected in a shared space, with each of them being affected by the other through varying degrees of intensity with affective interactions. However, while affective atmospheres can happen in-between human and non-human bodies, the phenomenological notion of inter-affectivity is limited to sentient beings only. The sublime has been considered either an intrinsic quality of selected objects or an experience induced by an encounter with an object (Costelloe, 2012). It has been associated with ideas of transcendence and universality, but over the years it has also demonstrated a connection with immanence and transformation (Lacan, 1986; Lyotard, 1984).

We argue that considering the sublime-as-affect in a geographical framework overcomes the limitations of a phenomenological approach that exclusively conceives of embodiment in terms of the inter-corporeal relations of human beings. Affects being intertwined in a complex network of emotions, bodily responses, and practices, involve a focus on bodies (human and nonhuman), sentient and non-sentient. The sublime-as-affect moves beyond the earlier romantic and aesthetic Burkean and Kantian definitions that described the sublime as sensuous in nature and located within the subject, not within the object. It is not restricted to merely the subject and therefore, transcends the debate on form and formlessness of sublime objects in literature. Affect has been used in rethinking and reframing human subjects and subjectivity from a non-anthropocentric perspective and challenging the binaries of mind/body and human/other-than-human (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015).

Further, the sublime-as-affect framed in geographical terms bypasses another limitation of the Kantian sublime, that which excludes women and certain races, as well as bodily responses and historical differences (Harris, 2009). Applying the concept of sublime-as-affect within the context of dark tourism, not only encompasses the radical negativity by injecting instances of negative presentation, which have the potential for partial representability, but also foster transformative tourist experiences, enabling the sublime-as-affect's potential for transformative by-products such as catharsis and empathy.

In addition to this, more careful considerations are necessary to acknowledge that while the sublime-as-affect can be perceived by Japanese people, as a theoretical concept the sublime is the product of a culturally specific, historically determined set of discourses (Shaw, 2006). Likewise, affect tends to be inscribed to "a white male European intellectual genealogy" (Ahmed, 2014). The sublime arises through the interplay of temporal, spatial, and social factors, and is perceived subjectively (Gutorow, 2012), dependant on one's disposition, generated and mediated by one's social and ideological background (Ray, 2005). The concept of sublime, which is not native nor common in Japan, in all its nuances and uses, historically was borrowed in alternative to native words of vaguely similar meaning it either energized or repressed, and was mostly knitted into nationalist political propaganda (Tansman, 2013).

One word adopted to approximate the feeling of sublime is *yūgen*, which recalls the experience of glimpsing at infinity and becoming, for a moment, one with nature (Ōnishi, 1935). Another expression is *mono no aware*. It indicates a feeling for the transience of all earthly things; it involves a recognition of the eternal flux of life upon this earth (Richie, 1996). Yet another concept is that of *wabisabi*, which Lauren Prusinski (2012) explicitly relates to sublime by defining it as "a crude or often faded beauty that correlates with a dark, desolate sublimity" (29). Discourses of sublimity in Japan also involve *omoiyari*, a word that has been roughly interpreted as 'empathy', and that indicates the use of one's intuition to attune to others' unspoken feelings, desires, and thoughts (Nisbett, 2003). *Omoi-yari*, while not directly related to the sublime, greatly influences how places of disaster are shaped for tourism purposes and the ways native tour guides perform tourism narratives in post-disaster places. By living in a society in which unspoken moments and messages are the social norm (Nisbett, 2003), we could say that Japanese people's modality of narration works not as much on the verbal level, which by them is not always believed to be a true reflection of feelings (Athanasiadou & Tabakowska, 1998), but more indirectly, on the unspoken, affective level (Martini & Minca, 2021).

Touring disaster: Japan and tourism after 2011

On March 11th, 2011, North-eastern Japan was ravaged by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, a tsunami, and a nuclear meltdown. The unexpected height of the tsunami waves caused thousands of casualties and destroyed entire towns. In the Fukushima Prefecture, 14 metre-high tsunami waves overtook the seawall and penetrated the nuclear power plant of Fukushima Daiichi. From March 11th to 14th, this caused a complete loss of power, a fault in the cooling system in four of the six reactors, the meltdown of the uranium oxide pellets therein contained, and hydrogen gas explosions in three of the four damaged units. The culmination of this chain of disastrous events was the release in the surrounding area - aided by the combined damage of the meltdown and the explosions- of a massive quantity of radioactive cesium, iodine, and other nuclear fission byproducts (Gill & Slater, 2013). The

enormous number of casualties and damage to buildings, roads, and other infrastructures mostly in the prefectures of Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate (all in the Tohoku region), led to prompt but uncoordinated evacuation and relief efforts. In the span of three days, the evacuated area around the power plant increased from a 3 km radius to 30 km, as radiation readings became more troubling. All along coastal Tohoku, towns were flattened and devastated, and more than 400,000 people were displaced. Japan, a nation that prides itself in its advanced system of disaster prevention and management, received harsh criticism for its insufficient response and handling of the catastrophe, especially in the case of the leaking power plant.

Following the disaster, recovery efforts in the exclusion zone focused on the decontamination and decommissioning of Fukushima Daiichi, a process that is estimated to take 30 years and currently employs around 10,000 workers. Many towns are now considered safe, but the returnees are few, as farms and businesses still suffer from tangible damage, stigma of radioactive contamination, and *fuhyo higai* (harmful rumours) propagated by sensationalistic media. Right after the disaster, tourism in Japan came to a halt. However, as soon as May 2011, sporadic curious tourists started to appear in the exclusion zone, as well as in the towns hit by the tsunami. Later, with the recovery underway and a more stable situation, Tohoku communities commenced educational tours, mostly for Japanese tourists, international journalists, and academics working on the disaster. These tours usually last from a few hours to a full day. Sometimes, they involve college classes or groups of foreign journalists, which spend up to a week in the post-disaster area. The tours are usually conducted by the few English-speaking tour guides in the area, or by *kataribe* (storytellers), survivors of the disaster who take a small group of tourists and, by narrating their stories, retain and transmit the memory of the disaster.

At the end of 2012, the idea of developing tourism around the dilapidated Power Plant was widely advertised by Genron, a collective of artists and intellectuals, who wrote a manifesto for the so-called Fukuichi Kankou Project. The project aimed at revitalizing the area and opening it for tourism as a 'nuclear village' that uses the imagery of the past nuclear disaster as a brand, just like Chernobyl and Hiroshima. The project faced harsh criticism regarding both aim and timing, as Japan was still involved in laborious and expensive recovery efforts, and was ultimately dropped. Presently, both the local communities and the Prefectures in Tohoku offer tours, and more tourists, national and international, are visiting the area.

The ethnographic material included in this paper was collected during the first author's 7-months stay in the Tohoku region of Japan in 2016, and a one-month stay in the summer of 2017, as part of a broader project on affect and dark tourism in Japan, which covers all three most-devastated prefectures: Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima. Sixty-five people have been interviewed: international tourists, national tourists, national and international tourism workers, residents, NGO and governmental representatives at regional, prefectural and local levels. The age of the tourists interviewed ranged from 19 to around 60, and most of them were Western tourists coming from the United States, Canada, Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom. The tourism workers interviewed were mostly Japanese, or Americans either working in Japan or managing tourism companies that organized trips to the disaster area. Regarding international tourists, out of 35 people interviewed 19 interviewees were female, and 16 male. Six Japanese tourists were also interviewed, 3 of them males, and 3 females. While some were traveling alone, the majority reached the disaster area as part of an educational or group tour. The interviews were collected mostly in person, but in some cases, because of time constraints, using Skype or emails. The majority of tourists were approached with the help of the private or municipal tour guides in the towns involved in post-disaster tourism, or through word of mouth in the communities. The remaining international tourists were contacted through social media. Tour guides, and members of municipalities, NGOs and other institutions were contacted by email or by phone before or during fieldwork. Three tourism workers and two international tourists were contacted after the fieldwork. In addition to the 65 people interviewed, observant participation with no interviews was also conducted with a group of 13 Italian tourists, and a group of 20 Chinese schoolchildren. The tourists interviewed were aware of the research being conducted, and accepted to be interviewed, signing a consent form in which they could choose whether to be recorded or not, and whether to use their name or be anonymized. The interviews, recorded and transcribed, ranged from 20 min long, to 2 and a half hours, with an average of an hour-long interviews. Six Skype interviews (two with international tourists, 4 with tourism workers) were conducted.

Twelve interviewees decided to answer to a set of questions by email, as they were not in Tohoku (or Japan) at the time of fieldwork, and had visited in the recent past. Multiple email exchanges with each interviewee took place, as to garner additional information and keep a communication channel open in case they wished to add, amend, or discuss the information given. Additional material was collected at the International Research Institute for Disaster Studies at the University of Tohoku, and using online sources such as websites, Facebook pages, blogs, and websites of travel agencies and tour guides.

All interviewees engaged with the topics of the natural and nuclear disaster, their reactions to it, their thoughts, opinions, and emotions. Affect was never directly mentioned in the questions, but by utilizing a narrative approach, the narrative patterns, stories, and the emotions that emerged in the interviews were weaved together and were related to moments of affect and, in particular, to sublime-affect. The material collected was complemented by participant observation and field notes, to gain insights into some of the complex affective responses that characterize these experiences and the way they are narrated and performed. Affect is concerned with experiences beyond cognition, so we acknowledge that narratives, emotions, and bodily responses observable during the fieldwork necessarily cover only a mediated affective experience. While many academics discuss affect as exclusively other-than-conscious or non-representational (Massumi, 2002; Pile, 2010; Thrift, 2004), social scientists and social psychologists have focus on those instances and ways in which affects appear above the surface and can thus be represented through analysis of performances (McCormack, 2003), affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009), affective and discursive practices (Wetherell, 2013). When setting out to look for moments of affect, and interpret affective moments as such, we look for narrative and performative patterns that appear in interviews and the participant observation conducted at the place. While affect is often considered difficult to represent, we agree with Wetherell that affective moments and discourse are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent, as discourse can showcase the effects of affective moments

as they are brought to the surface (Wetherell, 2013), and can more flexibly highlight the fluid and mobile nature of affects (Pile, 2010). These moments can be expressed not only in discourse, but also through symbols, practices, and non-intentional communication –giving insights into that which incited individuals to perform specific acts. To do so, the study of affect also needs to take account of non-verbal reactions, physical states, enactments and the unsaid (such as the moments of silence in front of the destruction caused by the tsunami) through participant observation. Relevant non-verbal cues were either recorded or annotated in a field diary by the first author. The triangulation of interviews, non-verbal cues, and consistent patterns across interviews and cues allowed us to identify patterns in answers and behaviours. We also took into account the fact that western and non-western (mostly Japanese) participants showcased and expressed non-verbal cues in different, culturally-oriented ways. Affective nods that point to an appreciation of the sublime were mentioned consistently by tourism workers (when describing the process of marketing and ‘construction’ of post-disaster tourism places) and by most tourists, both international and domestic, regardless of the means of the interview (in person, Skype, or email). Almost all of them had anecdotes and narratives, or expressed opinions that pointed to an awareness of an atmosphere that can be labeled and recognised as sublime. The selection of which quotes to use was based on representability (patterns that appeared consistently in interviews) and incisiveness (favouring quotes that expressed a pattern clearly and concisely).

Encountering the sublime

Strange and sublime ruins

Post-disaster tourism has become a component of the physical and psychological recovery process in some disaster-hit towns of Tohoku, with varying degrees of commitment and success (Martini & Minca, 2021). In the Northern Prefectures of Miyagi and Iwate, far from the exclusion zone of Fukushima, post-disaster tourism revolves around the massive tsunami that devastated the coastal towns. As recovery progresses, selected landmarks and ruins have been preserved and turned into heritage, to visually show the destructive power of the tsunami. It is indeed in the interplay between the visual and proprioceptive experience of the ruins, the sensorial experience of the environment, the practices of walking and contemplating, and the narratives given by the local guides, that we find the potential to evoke the charged affective atmosphere, the excess of matter produced in the crumbled remains of ruinous places, which in turn impacts affectively on the body. Excess of matter can touch the most visceral registers of the self (Hawkins & Muecke, 2003), and can house the residues of space of their material hosts (Arjona, 2016), experienced as sublime in the sense of suddenly becoming aware of the invisible excess that clings to ruins, which conjure sensations, imagines, and imaginaries (Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

In the exclusion zone of Fukushima, the apocalyptic devastation is still visible and untouched. Empty, dilapidated buildings are encroached by spider webs and overgrown weeds. The inside of houses abandoned in haste still have unmade beds, cups stained with the brown remains of evaporated tea, food in the fridge, and shoes lined up at the entrance. “The shocking part was that it was almost as if they’d left yesterday, everything was untouched, perfectly still”, says Sam (21/03/2017), a college student who visited one of the towns. Sam captures in his description the absence evoked in the interstices of the ruinous configurations of buildings, objects, and empty roads, which conjure the ghost of their owner through a negative presentation: the absent victims are called to mind by the very fact of their absence (Ray, 2005). Negative presentation, in its unwillingness to represent anything (Gutorow, 2012), implies their ghosts and the causes of their very destruction, allowing access to potential “states of privation through which the event is disclosed to ‘disarmed’ thought” (Ray, 2005). When this disarmed thought is brought through the surface using narration, it becomes clear how the absence still depends on its representation, while, however, grounding it in a discourse that tries to approximate the “immaterial corporeality” (Žižek, 1989, p. 18). In fact, this immaterial corporeality is not only perceived in the landscape by Sam, but also in the eyes of the local people:

“I could tell that it had frightened a lot of people, because you could look behind their eyes and like see that it had an effect, that their faces wouldn’t show. I don’t know how to explain it. On the surface, they seemed quite happy overall, normal.”

[Sam (21/03/2017)]

Alex, a tourism worker who visited the area as a tourist, cannot seem to put his experience into words:

“Even now, in such places, you can feel that there is something there. The houses are being overtaken by nature. It is a weird feeling, ...and you can feel it in other parts of Japan, but here, still, even to this day they can’t get rid of that feeling.”

[Alex (23/08/2016)]

The affective potential for sublimity, and the incapacity to condense it in linguistic signs, is sometimes expressed by international visitors using suggestive, partial, and vague ways just like Alex did. Such wording could recall a moment of sublime, as “if the affection be well conveyed, it will work its effect without any clear idea, often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it” (Burke, 1885). “It was strange”, Jytte told me during our interview. She is a Danish journalist who participated in a tour in heavily damaged Ishinomaki. During our Skype call, she seemed overwhelmed by what she experienced, and unable to precisely describe her feelings towards the dilapidated state of the city centre.

“It was strange to be in a city like that...it was empty! And that influences the feeling you have when you visit. (...) It felt strange because it was so empty. I had that feeling of being in an abandoned city.... there was a feeling...it was strange.”

[Jytte (03/08/2016)]

Being unable to pinpoint certain feelings recalls the complex and often contrasting configurations of an affective assemblage, a subjective apprehension of an atmosphere of place which can evoke a feeling of sublime, an intensity beyond cognition that people seek to capture, a lack of representation made understandable as an empty space within representation itself (French & Shacklock, 2014). The sublime, especially in its earlier form, implies both pleasure and powerlessness in front of the greatness of nature, as the word choice of Susumu, a college student from the United States shows: "It is amazing to see the power of a disaster as towns and landmarks had disappeared from its wrath" (Susumu, 16/08/2016).

This can, however, be recognised but interpreted differently by people with different cultural frames. Maki, a young Japanese woman who volunteers as a tour guide in Sendai, recalled an experience that puzzled her:

"I brought some German tourists to the affected area, and I said, almost subconsciously, doesn't it look like a battlefield? Because there is nothing and people lost everything in one hour or so, and one of the German people said 'no no no Maki, the war and the natural disaster are totally different, they are two different things. The one is by the humans, and one is by the nature, and you have to think separately'. And to me, as a Japanese, I don't know...I think it is the same thing. It is great violence, either by nature or humans, but it is the same. Do European people think like that?"

[Maki (15/06/2016)]

As a Japanese tour guide, Maki's cultural background is influenced by Shinto doctrine and Buddhism, for which there is no clear difference between natural or man-made disasters, which are seen either as *tenbatsu* (divine punishment), or *tensai* (heavenly disaster). The 2011 disaster has been defined by Japanese institutions as *tensai*, a term which does not distinguish between natural and man-made (Richie, 1996), and that carries with it a sense of resignation and fatalism (Gill & Slater, 2013). This negativity is indicative of Hegel's definition of the sublime as a subjective experience where reason is overwhelmed or a confrontation with the absolute substance or master (in this case, submitting to the force of nature). At the same time, this also explains the proactive and recovery-oriented attitude of Japanese people, says Dr. Kanatsu:

"Japanese people were angry, but, mostly, they accepted their fate, and started thinking what they could do at that moment. This is the core of the Japanese culture whether one likes or not, which many non-Japanese fail to understand."

[Dr Kanatsu (24/08/2017)]

Ruins facilitate the affective response of the sublime, as they unleash the pathos of the imagination. Verbally, the sublime can be captured as it folds in the vacant spaces created by the disaster, when tourists, after having experienced an immanent, non-representable moment, come back to their senses and attempt to process it. Serena, who went to Fukushima but refused to visit the exclusion zone for 'health reasons', asks:

"What was there before? Maybe cultivated land, I don't know, houses, whatever was there before, now there are these endless rows of blue tarps, and you know under that there is soil that is not safe."

[Serena (30/08/2016)]

The question she poses unfolds an imaginative, affective potential that is sublime, as it "can 'attach itself' to nothing beyond the realm of the sensible, feeling the exhilaration of its own boundlessness" (Ellison, 2001). Her question is echoed by Andrea, a German tourist who, when confronted with the ruinous landscape of Rikuzentakata, together with pictures of the area as it was before after a long silence said "I thought to myself: what? Where did the town go?" (Andrea, 18/07/2016). I (the first author) was with Andrea when she visited the town, and I could experience how she would stop during our walk, trying to imagine, to picture the mirage of the town as it was before. In experiencing the tension of ruins, of empty space that represent something not there anymore, Andrea could perceive a sublime moment, in which the mind tries to go beyond eyesight and pushes towards an invisible it cannot grasp (Gutorow, 2012), towards the absences summoned by ruins, the fantasies, objects, people they evoke, and the spaces for generative imagination that somehow fill the gaps. It is in these gaps, in these unanswered questions and silences, in the intersecting temporalities, which collide and merge in a landscape of juxtaposed asynchronous moments (Crang & Travlou, 2001), that the sublime as an affect can be perceived (Fig. 1).

The space inbetween: silent and invisible sublime

A crucial harbinger of the sublime as an affect is its inexpressible nature. Indeed, the uncanny and 'strange' atmospheres of ruins cannot be woven into coherent narratives (Edensor, 2005), but can only trail into vague descriptions or, most commonly silence. Affect, being an intensity that goes beyond cognition and –in most cases– verbal representation, is thus the most appropriate frame to look at these silent, but poignant moments. Radica, a woman from the Caribbean islands who visited the exclusion zone, says that what impressed her the most in the disaster area was:

"...The silence. There was no sound where there once were houses and children playing. That struck me first. Next was the image of time standing still. The clock on the exterior of the elementary school stopped at the moment the tsunami struck."

[Radica (15/08/2016)]

The outside silence somehow mirrors the silence of the mind in front of the ruins, when the ability to bring to consciousness a thought or sensation is defeated (Shaw, 2006). And yet, it is exactly because the mind is silenced, that it can open up to a feeling



Fig. 1. Ruins in the exclusion zone around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

for that which lies beyond thought and language, a traumatic emptiness that exists beyond the field of representation. In tours in the disaster area in Tohoku, the guides usually leave some time for tourists to just remain in silence and confront the experience. A Japanese volunteer guide I (the first author) interviewed says:

“After I explained that where you are now it is a place where a huge number of people died, tourists went off the bus and went to the beach, and they remained silent. Pondering about the tremendous force of nature, about the disaster, I don’t know.”

[Volunteer guide (15/06/2016)]

When the magnitude of the experience exceeds narration, silence feels for many the only appropriate response, in a dialectic process of memory-making and witnessing, in which the power of silence acts as a chamber of resonance for the sublime. The complex intimate reactions of visitors to the narratives of horror experienced by the survivors, the gloomy affective atmospheres, and the physical traces in the landscape can only be received in silence, expressed by silence and by a cathartic release experienced from confronting such pain from the safe place as an audience (Huey, 2011).

The atmosphere of abandonment and emptiness in the exclusion zone is somehow not disrupted by the cleaning and decontamination workers going back and forth in the area, dressed in white protective overalls and wearing surgical masks. Their presence does not reassure but haunts tourists, reminding them of the dangerous, invisible radiations in the air. The sublime-as-affect, as intensity that can spike and develop from potentiality to emotion (Ngai, 2005), in the case of nuclear places is culturally constructed. As radiations cannot be seen, or felt, the sublime has to be imagined within one’s own cultural frame, and thus perceived as a culturally-constructed interpretation and process of sense-making of post-disaster places. Fukushima represents the most recent addition to landscapes of the nuclear sublime, which is characterized not by intimations of transcendence, but by the sudden realization of the annihilating force of nuclear power, so all-encompassing that it pushes the mind to “think the unthinkable” (Ferguson, 1984; Ray, 2005).

The moment of silence and contemplation that many tourists perform at such sites recalls how the sublime can be constrained by a constant struggle between imagination and reason to set things in order and involves a sense of moral righteousness and human dignity when imagination loses to reason. It can be described both as a judgment and a feeling while emphasizing that judgment and feeling are not identical (Clewis, 2009).

Theo, a British tourist, visited the landfill where the radioactive soil collected from the exclusion zone is stored. In an email interview he describes how:

“...the unresolved storage of contaminated waste piles near the nuclear power plant sites and around the affected farms whose topsoil had been removed was shocking. I had expected those bags to also have been destroyed or completely cleansed by now.”

[Theo (03/08/2016)]

The feeling of danger that emanates from the radiation threat is uncanny and yields potential for the sublime because it creates “a feeling of hypervigilance while maintaining the lure of deniability” (Schwab, 2014). Radiation represents the zenith of danger, an invisible force with destructive material effects that possesses a ‘vibrancy’ (Bennett, 2010), that cannot be experienced or sensed but that can mortally impact the body (Schwab, 2014). David Nye (1996) argues that nuclear weapons are too horrifying to be ascribed to the aesthetic of the sublime, as it offers no moral enlightenment. For these reasons, Fukushima’s radiations too, exceed conventionalized representation, and can thus only be evoked negatively (Fig. 2).

The transformative potential of sublime-as-affect

“I remember standing there and looking at the sea thinking how lucky my own country was because something the extent of this tsunami would have wiped out most of the island.”

[Radica (15/08/2016)]

We argue that while the sublime-as-affect encompasses this negativity, it also harbours the possibility for positivity, reparation, and empathy. While the Kantian sublime claims that a presupposition of free will implies that we are subject to moral laws, the sublime as defined by certain psychoanalysts and existential philosophers is devoid of free will.

According to Clewis (2009), “not all affects elicit or evoke a feeling of the sublime when reflected on aesthetically” and “a necessary condition of their eliciting a feeling of sublimity is that they be morally based” (p. 91). Further, an internal affect-based morality has its limitations in terms of understanding how complex moral ideologies are formulated and applied in situations. The connection between sublime, morality and affect indicates that the sublime-as affect is somewhat morally rooted and that material objects are capable of evoking it. The sublime-as-affect from the perspective of geographies of affect is materially grounded and therefore, while it is associated with ideas of transcendence, it does not carry a risk of detachment from worldly feelings. For the same reason, the feelings related to visiting disaster places, and the potential of experiencing a moment of sublime, can carry a seed of positivity. Hiroko, a tour guide, explains:

“Maybe people think visible things are very educative for children, both Japanese and visitors, so the [Hiroshima] Dome is the worst construction building in Japan due to the atomic bomb, and many people died. So ... watching those domes and the memorial... tells us many things, that's why many things were learned, that peace is important. So many people in Tohoku think the same as Hiroshima.”

[Hiroko (15/04/2016)]



Fig. 2. The town of Tomioka in 2016, 10 km from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Hiroko is not only referring to the nuclear disaster but also the earthquake and tsunami. The disaster, while terrifying, or because of that, can be employed to promote memory and a peaceful future by politicians, individuals, and media. The fantasies and imaginary carry also a “pervasive sense of recasting the disaster zone as an idyll of freedom, a zone outside the law that generates a new conviviality with other species and a flourishing of new life philosophies” (Schwab, 2014, 89).

Applying the concept of sublime-as-affect within the context of dark tourism can highlight positive transformative tourist experiences, thereby enabling new possibilities for reparation and surprise, that come in unstructured and seemingly paradoxical ways. Angela, who volunteered after the disaster and has an NGO active in Northern Miyagi, experienced sadness, but also amazement at the resilience and resistance of the survivors: “...some did smile and I even shared a bit of laughter with a few because at the end of the day everyone was very grateful for what they had. There was amazing beauty amidst so much destruction...amazing strength amidst so much fear” (Angela, 28/02/2017). The paradox of ‘laughing after having lost everything’ points to a mix of pleasure and pain that matches a reverence for the grandeur experienced, and at the same time a necessity of confronting our inadequacy in the face of traumatic devastation, and the unattainability of conventional representation (Ray, 2005). In the image of smiling survivors, constructed in tension to the atmosphere of death and disaster, there is a seed of this transformative potential, where the unspeakable pain of the disaster can give way to empathy.

This ambivalence pertains to the realm of the sublime. The potential for sublime experiences of a post-disaster landscape is immensely commodifiable for tourism purposes because of the fascination towards dark and apocalyptic fantasies (Schwab, 2014). Stefan, the founder of the website Japanguide.com, believes that “in the long-term, the region may even profit from the publicity gained through 3.11” (Stefan, 16/08/2016). However, this can only happen when enough time has passed, and locals do not feel exploited or offended by tourist endeavours in the area -contrary to what happened with the Fukuichi Kankou Project, which might have been advertised too soon and did not give time to the local population to mourn their loss, before being able to move on to make sense of the experience in a more transformative light. Aiko, a volunteer guide, also recalls a personal experience while guiding tourists in the disaster area, in which the visit to a temporary housing provoked in her both sadness and hope:

“... it is very moving, when an old lady 88 at the time of my visit, and her son, living in temporary housing, and it is really small. Everything is little, even a small puppy and puppy food and all furniture, and she welcomed us into her house. And at the time of the tsunami, she hurt her back and after the tsunami, her son was found to suffer from pancreatic cancer, but still, they were smiling and welcomed us.”

[Aiko (15/06/216)]

This moving feeling, and the anecdote, could be a way to represent a sublime moment framing her feeling with concepts such as *wabisabi* (expressed by the small size of the house and everything in it, and yet the smiles of the old lady and her son), acceptance of impermanence, manifested by the very fact of being in temporary housing, and indirectly by the son's cancer. Such native concepts are woven into the fabric of sublime moments narrated by Japanese people, and influence not the potential of Japanese people to experience a sublime affect, but the modalities of representation with which, after the experience, the mind attempts to come to terms with it and this affect is brought to the surface and represented.

Conclusions

In this article, we framed the concept of the sublime as a specific affect that can arise when tourists' feelings resonate with the atmospheres of pain and fascination of post-disaster places that qualify as dark tourism sites. We discussed how the notion of sublime has been interpreted and how the sublime-as-affect fills the theoretical gaps in its earlier interpretations. The sublime-as-affect not only overcomes the limitations of phenomenological approaches in understanding experiences in post-disaster areas but also allows for a better representation of negativity as well as positive transformative potential. Furthermore, our article highlights the ways and modalities in which the sublime-as-affect, especially when arising from situations of dark and post-disaster tourism, can become a powerful tool for transformative experiences in tourism. This potentiality can and should be scrutinized by tourism academics (as the reach of the sublime in all its facets moves beyond dark tourism), as well as harnessed by tourism practitioners interested in creating more mindful as well as emotionally rewarding tourism experiences. It could be further used in tourism studies to frame spaces of absence and silences. By being morally grounded, it does not encourage complete transcendence and detachment allowing room for immanence and a positive platform for feelings like empathy and reparation.

In post-disaster tourism experiences, potential moments of sublime-as-affect were expressed in particular while gazing at the ruins of the towns hit by the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown. Ruins, as obscure traces of the disaster, and the painful yet powerful atmospheres in places where the tsunami or the nuclear meltdown have radically changed the landscape, can be represented through negative, “indirect, oblique, or sublime forms of presentation” (Ray, 2005).

The ruins, and the silent, invisible threat of radiations, can constitute a postmodern reordering of the Romantic transcendence, and support a potential for positive affects, which can become a vehicle for perception and negotiation of the sublime in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster.

The destruction caused by the tsunami, still visible in the towns, and the vacant spaces of the exclusion zone can allow tourists access to an affective involvement and transformative power that opens the door to an internal process through which a better understanding of the sublime is revealed or without words or explanations, both by tourists and, through the presence of tourists, by locals. It is through this process that the sublime comes into view and its perception (as partial and constrained by discourse as

it might be) is “dug out” of its concealment (Ray, 2005) in processes that can be empowering and crucial for the population to move on, as Aiko, a Japanese guide, seems to imply:

“The things that people want to go away, they do not go nowhere, they come back again and again unless you release the grievance in a good way.”

[Aiko (15/06/2016)]

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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