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From the mystical to the algorithmic sublime: withdrawal and verifiable shortage in AI-generated images

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Abstract

AI-generated images are usually theorised against photography, as the end of the index or of the photographic; what they cancel, however, has a closer precedent in painting. Twentieth-century painting, culminating in Suprematism, made the withdrawal of the object its programme; generative images carry out the same withdrawal by other means, not as a consequence of that programme but as its translation into a statistical apparatus. Read together, the two cases show what the sublime depends on. In Lyotard's rereading of Burke, the sublime is conditioned on privation, whose core form is the threat that nothing might happen; applications of the category to generative images that invoke scale and unsurveyability substitute its outward marks for its determination. Through close readings of Newman's *Onement I* and Malevich's sequence from the *Black Square* to the blank canvas, set against theories of the index and latent space, this article proposes verifiable shortage as a criterion: a cancellation amounts to privation only if it registers as a shortage in what remains. Newman retained scale, viewing distance, the beholder's body and a set of theological references; Suprematism removed them one by one until no recipient was left, yet the shortage remained identifiable throughout. This configuration, in which the unpresentable is pushed beyond speech and image while both ends of the relation stay in place, is termed the mystical sublime. Generative images cancel more thoroughly but leave no shortage. The causal guarantee of the index withdraws while its outward forms remain, a condition termed the statistical index; what diffusion subtracts has been named noise in advance; and on the side of viewing there is neither a position to occupy nor a statement that can be formed. In the resulting configuration, the algorithmic sublime, cancellation proceeds and the sublime's outward forms remain intact while its condition of occurrence has lapsed. It is not a new form of the sublime but the sublime in failure.

Introduction

Since AI-generated images[1] entered wide circulation, discussion of them has concentrated

[1] The AI-generated images discussed here are limited to still images produced from text prompts by diffusion-based models. Generative AI also follows other technical routes, such as autoregressive and adversarial models, whose generative mechanisms differ from the subtractive process analysed in the section "Statistical index and noise"; video generation raises a further set of questions in the temporal dimension and also falls outside the scope of this article. For brevity, "AI-generated images" hereafter refers to images within this scope.

on authenticity, copyright, labour and the attribution of style. Each of these questions has its own urgency, yet they share a premise: that the established relation between image and viewer still holds, and that new technical conditions merely make it harder to adjudicate. If that relation itself no longer holds, what calls for re-examination is not only the answers to these questions but the categories on which the questions rest.

Of these categories, the sublime is the one most deeply implicated in this shift, because it is determined not by any property of the object but by whether a certain privation can be experienced. From Edmund Burke through Immanuel Kant to Jean-François Lyotard, the category has been restated many times. In Lyotard's rereading of Burke, privation is established as the condition under which the sublime occurs: the sublime is "kindled by the threat of nothing further happening", whereas beauty gives only "a positive pleasure" (Lyotard 1985: 10). Applications of the sublime to generative images usually appeal to scale and unsurveyability: the models are vast, their operations cannot be taken in as a whole, and they therefore belong to the same class of instances as the mountains and storms of traditional theories of the sublime (Lyotard 1985: 9). Scale and unsurveyability, however, are only the customary marks of the sublime in natural objects; to argue from them is to substitute the category's marks for its determination. If an old category is to be applied to a recent object without losing its determination, it needs a condition that can be applied repeatedly across different cases.

The literature on generative images has measured them chiefly against photography. For Elcott and Trombley, "photography" has become "a style technically fungible with other styles" (2025: 152); for Meyer, the "photographic" has become "an exploitable visual resource" (2025a: 288); for Steyerl, generative images "shift the focus from photographic indexicality to stochastic discrimination" (2023); and Somaini traces how archives, photographic ones included, are compressed into latent space (2026: 34, 36). What a generative image cancels, however, is not the look of the photograph, which it preserves, but the object whose presence that look once guaranteed; and the art that first made the cancellation of the object its programme was not photography but painting. Twentieth-century painting pushed this cancellation to its limit: first the object was expelled from the picture, then the boundary between figure and ground, then the difference between two whites, and finally the canvas itself. The relation between this sequence and generative images is not one of influence, still less of progress, but of translation: the same operation carried out by other means. Since the painterly withdrawal proceeded item by item, it becomes possible to test which of these items

the sublime depends on, and the condition so derived can then be applied to what generative images cancel.

The argument proceeds by conceptual analysis combined with close reading. Works by Newman and Malevich, and the documented sequence of Malevich's Suprematist works between 1915 and 1920, are read as a series of successive cancellations. Theories of the index (Krauss 1985; Doane 2007), of latent space and generative imaging (Somaini 2026; Meyer 2025a, 2025b; Steyerl 2023; Elcott and Trombley 2025) and of machine vision (Paglen 2019; MacKenzie and Munster 2019) are read against that series; the technical literature on latent diffusion (Rombach et al. 2022) is consulted only to fix what the generative process subtracts.

The terror of emptiness: the occurrence of the sublime

In December 1948 Barnett Newman wrote "The Sublime Is Now", placing the sublime once again at the centre of the theory of painting; he would later give his large canvases and first sculptures titles such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, *Here*, *Now* and *Be*. For Newman the sublime became a question of the here and now: it is tied to the "now", the most fleeting of temporal positions, rather than lodged in some vast object at a distance (Lyotard 1985: 1).

Newman admired Burke and dismissed Kant, holding that Burke alone had grasped what is essential to the sublime (Crowther 1984: 53). Burke's sublime arises from terror, and alongside power and vastness, privation is also on the list: "All general privations are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity*, *Darkness*, *Solitude* and *Silence*" (Burke 1990: 65). Lyotard recasts these items as a series of pairings and adds one at the end: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. "What is terrifying", he concludes, "is that the It happens that does not happen, that it stops happening" (Lyotard 1985: 10).

Terror must be mixed with pleasure for the sublime to arise, and for this the threat has to be suspended, held off at a safe distance. This suspension is itself a privation, only its object has shifted: what is lacking is no longer light or life but the threat itself. For the feeling that results Burke reserves a separate name, *delight*,[2] to distinguish it from ordinary pleasure (Lyotard 1985: 11). The sublime is thereby defined by its indirect allusion to human mortality

[2] Burke reserves *delight* for the feeling that arises when pain or danger is removed, as distinct from the positive feeling he calls *pleasure*. The conversion of privation into the sublime discussed below depends entirely on this distinction (Burke 1990: 33–34).

and is to be understood in an "existential" sense (Crowther 1984: 52).

In Kant, the reference to mortality does not disappear, but the structure of the sublime comes to depend on the capacity of finite human beings to affirm themselves rationally before an overwhelming phenomenon (Crowther 1984: 52). For Lyotard, terror thereby ceases to constitute the sublime on its own and becomes the occasion on which reason confirms itself; in Burke, by contrast, the threat always falls on the "now", on the nothingness of the present moment (Lyotard 1985: 4, 10).

If the threat falls on the "now", what the sublime concerns is how the fact that something unpresentable exists comes to pass, suddenly, in perception. Lyotard marks this occurrence with a German phrase, *dass es geschieht*, "that it happens": before any question of what it is or what it means, there is a barer event, namely that it happens (Lyotard 1985: 2). The sublime is thereby transformed from a question of space and magnitude into a question of time. Once the identifiable object recedes to the edge of the unpresentable, by what means can painting still bear witness to the unpresentable (Lyotard 1985: 12)?

Painting without an object: Newman, Malevich and the minimal conditions of witnessing

In tracing Burke, Lyotard gives this answer: the stake of art was "to be the witness to the fact that there is indeterminacy", and "such testimony can only be achieved in a determined fashion", through support, frame, line, colour, space and the figure (Lyotard 1985: 13). The difficulty, then, lies not in finding a form capable of presenting the unpresentable, but in the fact that testimony must rely on the visible while what it testifies to is invisible. Since witnessing depends on the determined, the withdrawal of the object cannot be traceless: it must register as some shortage in what is retained, or else there is no way to judge whether anything has in fact been withdrawn, and the threat on which the sublime depends cannot be established.

Onement I (1948) is a small, dark red painting, just over twenty-seven inches high, split from top to bottom by a narrow, more orange band. In size it is far smaller than the paintings Newman would go on to make, many of them several metres across, yet almost all his works of the following two decades and more are variations on this format.

The colour field is not differentiated enough to evoke associations with nature; taken by itself, it is merely a coloured expanse. The edges of the canvas define this expanse as a picture, and the incision of the band gives it semantic activation. There is nothing identifiable in the

painting, yet it cannot for that reason be regarded as blank.

The band can activate the field because the two determine each other: the band is determined only in its opposition to the field, and the field is declared only once the band has divided it. Paul Crowther extends this formal relation by analogy to the relation between the human and the infinite: only in opposition to the infinite and the unknowable can human beings define and express their own finite, rational nature (Crowther 1984: 56). By this analogy, Newman does not need to destroy form, as traditional sublime art did; an artefact determined by form is already sufficient to carry the relation between the human and the unknowable.

Crowther's analogy remains within the formal relations of the picture, but the title leads the painting beyond them. The word *Onement*, in Thomas B. Hess's account, "suggests wholeness, harmony, but also, as Newman himself pointed out, refers to At-onement, Atonement", the events of Yom Kippur, which for the Kabbalists "was the ideal moment for meditation on the Messianic secret, on rebirth, new life—in a word, Creation"; and among Newman's favourite fields of study were "Jewish myths and customs" and the Kabbalah (Hess 1971: 53). In Gershom Scholem's exposition, the Nothing from which, for the mystics, everything was created "is by no means a mere negation"; "only to us does it present no attributes because it is beyond the reach of intellectual knowledge" (Scholem 1995: 25). Correspondingly, the God who is hidden in his own self was called by the early Spanish Kabbalists *En-Sof*: not "He who is infinite" but "that which is infinite" (Scholem 1995: 12). This "nothing" is at once the starting point of creation and that which is unpresentable.

Crowther reads, in the opposition of band and field, the self-definition of finite reason; Hess, by way of the title, reads the hidden God. The two readings coexist in the same painting without excluding each other because the painting still holds many identifiable retentions: the formal relation between field and band, the format that prescribes a viewing distance, the beholder's body enclosed by the format within that distance, and a whole set of theological references traceable to the Kabbalah. The object has been suspended, but objecthood has not; the subject has been moved out of the narrative but is still placed before the painting as its viewer.

Newman's retentions, however, are too many for it to be decided which of them the sublime requires. Each reading can make its case by holding on to a single item, and none of the items is thereby shown to be indispensable. To determine what the sublime actually depends on, these retentions must be withdrawn one by one, to see at which step it fails.

More than thirty years before *Onement I*, in the summer of 1915, Kazimir Malevich painted the *Black Square* over a painting in progress: the black plane was laid directly over a group of coloured geometric elements, and X-ray images reveal the layer beneath; as the paint layer has cracked over time, the covered colours have begun to show through the fissures (Shatskikh 2012: 43, 45). In his manifesto Malevich wrote that objects had vanished like smoke (Malevich 1976: 119); yet once the smoke had cleared, the geometric elements beneath had not been cancelled, only pressed underneath.

In December of the same year the *Black Square* hung at the "0.10" exhibition in Petrograd, in the corner between wall and ceiling, the place where icons hang in Orthodox homes. In the first group of works listed in the catalogue, it alone bore a laconic title, *Tetragon*, and Alexandre Benois was the first to call it publicly an icon (Shatskikh 2012: 106, 109).

In 1927 Malevich gave this withdrawal a theoretical formulation in *The Non-Objective World*:[3] "Under Suprematism I understand the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art"; "the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth" (Malevich 1959: 67). What is cancelled is the object's standing as the reason for painting; there are still forms, patches of colour and edges in the picture, but they no longer serve anything identifiable. Art then reaches a "desert" in which nothing can be perceived but feeling, and ideas, concepts and images, everything that determined the objective-ideal structure of life and of art, are cast aside "in order to heed pure feeling" (Malevich 1959: 67).

The feeling that remains after this emptying is taken to be the only thing that is real and of value; the desert is a place cleared so that feeling may appear, and so it is not empty. Éric Valentin accordingly reads this "nothing" as overflowing: structurally, it is close to what Meister Eckhart calls the Godhead (Valentin 2015: 173).

In the second half of 1917, the speed of the coloured planes dissolved them into space and the boundary between figure and ground disappeared entirely; Malevich called this dissolution. In *White on White* (1918), a slightly tilted white square floats on a ground that is likewise white, the two separated only by slight differences of brushwork and colour temperature. Newman's band is determined by its opposition to the field; here the opposition itself is fading. Seen up close, one corner of the square seems to be cut away, because the white was laid over a darker layer beneath. White Suprematism came to an end in 1919, and with it Malevich withdrew

[3] Titles of Malevich's works and writings are given in their standard English forms rather than as translations of the Russian originals.

from painting; his first solo exhibition, in 1920, closed with a plain white monochrome canvas (Shatskikh 2012: 253, 260, 266, 269).

Faced with the charge that the canvas was empty, Malevich replied in an unpublished text: "What do you mean it's empty, when you can see that the canvas is painted with white paint?"; "If the white canvas were empty, then it would not inspire any questions or indignation" (Shatskikh 2012: 269). Cancellation here does not efface the material through which it is carried out. Boris Groys regards this unyielding materiality as the foundation of the early avant-garde: God could destroy the world without leaving a trace because he had created it out of nothing; with God dead, a destruction that leaves no visible trace is impossible (Groys 2013).

This reading confronts an ancient impasse: the transcendent must exceed all names, yet to say that it exceeds all names one must first give it a name. Michael A. Sells uses the term *apophasis* specifically for writing in which ineffability is performed rather than merely asserted (Sells 1994: 2–3). Malevich's writings fall on the side of assertion; the performance takes place on the canvas. Dissolution, white on white, the pure white canvas: each undoes a determination established by the one before.

Eckhart writes that to be empty of all creatures is to be full of God, and to be full of creatures is to be empty of God; detachment requires one to empty oneself, and the emptying is so that God may be born within (Eckhart 1981: 288). This is performance rather than assertion. Both parties are emptied: the soul gives up its attachments and images, the Godhead gives up its own attributes and persons. The reception on which the birth depends is likewise mutual, for if the soul does not receive that outflowing, what is threatened is the very being of the Godhead (Sells 1994: 12, 176–177). In the Suprematist desert there is no such mutuality: ideas, concepts and images are all cast aside, only feeling remains, and no recipient is left in the desert (Malevich 1959: 67).

Jewish mysticism and Christian apophatic theology are two traditions that must not be conflated. The hidden one of the Kabbalah does not cease to be God by being hidden, and those who approach him, relying on a tradition that can be studied, have not left the world; in Eckhart, for the birth to take place, reception must occur in both directions. On one point the two agree: the unpresentable is pushed beyond speech and image, while both ends of the relation remain in place. Privation thus has a source and a bearer. This configuration shows its outline only

after Suprematism has cancelled the recipient; it is here termed the *mystical sublime*.[4]

The formal relation that sustains objecthood in Newman's painting loses its boundary in dissolution, and on the blank canvas there is no longer any relation at all. The hall of "0.10" organised the whole wall as a single picture, so that one painting before one viewer was no longer the basic unit. The theological reference did not disappear but moved from the hidden God of the Kabbalah to the position of the Orthodox icon. As for the beholder's body, the desert has no place for it. The end of making is withdrawn as well: *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (1920) declares: "There can be no question of painting in Suprematism, painting has long been outlived, and the artist himself is a prejudice of the past" (Shatskikh 2012: 269).

Beneath the black plane lies a group of geometric elements; beneath the white square lies a dark layer; the pure white canvas vacates precisely the places previously occupied by shapes and differences of colour. Although the recipient is gone, what has been withdrawn, and where it once stood, can still be pointed out in each work. What the sublime requires, then, is not that enough be cancelled, but that each cancellation leave, in what is retained, a shortage that can be verified.

Statistical index and noise: non-objective generation in AI-generated images

The AI-generated images that have entered circulation in large numbers in recent years do not cancel how the object looks in the picture; on the contrary, they render it more completely than ever. What is cancelled is the fact that the object was once present. The application of paint, its material and its presence, which painting retained through all its cancellations, vanish here together: the cancellation is carried out by a statistical apparatus, no surface is coated, and there is no point of view on which a viewer could stand. Their appearance is that of photographs; Noam M. Elcott and Tim Trombley, borrowing Hito Steyerl's term, call this statistical rendering (Elcott and Trombley 2025: 152–153).

The persuasiveness of the photograph does not come from resemblance: a painting can be just as lifelike, yet no one takes it as evidence on that account. A photograph is credible because of the physical, generative relation between image and object, and the concept that describes this relation is the index. Generative images retain the appearance of the photograph, but this

[4] The term *mystical sublime* designates a configuration: the unpresentable is pushed beyond speech and image, while both ends of the relation, the source of privation and its bearer, remain in place. "Mystical" is taken from this configuration, shared by the Kabbalah and Eckhart. As with the *algorithmic sublime* below, what is named is a configuration, not a feeling.

relation between what is visible and what has been is severed.

On the Shroud of Turin, at the position of Christ's right wrist, there is a small stain. It has no shape and resembles nothing, and precisely for that reason it is the most intensively analysed spot on the entire cloth. Mary Ann Doane opens her essay with Georges Didi-Huberman's study of the shroud and cites his conclusion: "The effacement of all figuration in this trace is itself the guarantee of a link, of authenticity; if there is no figuration it is because contact has taken place" (Doane 2007: 135). Carbon-14 dating showed the shroud to be a forgery of the thirteenth or fourteenth century; yet the stains remain evidence of something, still bearing witness to a historical event, even if that event was a forgery (Doane 2007: 142).

If a forged shroud still has evidentiary force, the guarantee lies not in the body but in contact as such; the efficacy of the index is thereby separated from the authenticity of the object. Measured by contact, the shroud, Malevich's pictures and generative images present three different kinds of "nothing". There is no figure on the shroud because contact took place; there is no object in Malevich's pictures because the object was cancelled; the figure in the generative image is complete and intact, yet contact never took place. The absences in the first two can be traced: the stain points to a body that once lay against this cloth, the covering layer points to the picture it covers. What the generative image lacks is precisely that act of contact, and the absence of contact leaves no mark on the picture.

The index in Charles Sanders Peirce has two definitions that seem incompatible. As trace (the footprint, the death mask), it implies a material connection between sign and object, together with a stubborn temporality: the trace does not evaporate at the instant of its production but persists as a witness to anteriority. As deixis (the pointing finger, the "this" of language), it exhausts itself in the instant of its enactment and is bound to the present (Doane 2007: 136). The two converge at the frame: the frame indicates "look here, now", while the trace confirms that something was indeed there to be seen; "once" and "now" are here in collusion (Doane 2007: 140). Generative images undo this convergence: the trace is cancelled while deixis is retained. The trace guarantees anteriority and is also the ground on which a cancellation can be identified; without the trace, both fail together.

What Roland Meyer calls the synthetic camera yields a statistically probable image: many viewpoints are synthesised in it, yet it is identical with none of them; it has no position, not even a virtual one, and emerges together with the image from a field of noise (Meyer 2025a: 284–285). The things in these images have no back; they exist "only in this one view" (Meyer

2025a: 284–285), whereas the trace can guarantee anteriority only on the premise that what is photographed already existed before being photographed. Deixis still operates, but the point to which it points exists at no moment. In Suprematism, the position of the viewer was no longer required by the work; here what is vacant is the position of the object, while the position of the viewer is kept fully intact. Perspective, the look of particular camera models, lenses and shutter speeds: an entire apparatus prepared for the human eye operates as usual where nothing is seen (Meyer 2025a: 284, 286–288).

Since the generative image has nothing photographed, the picture must come from elsewhere, and this source is mathematical. Antonio Somaini calls it latent space: a relational space constituted by distance, proximity and clustering, in which nearness means similarity and some realisations are more probable than others (Somaini 2026: 22–23). Once archival material enters a training set, it is no longer stored as discrete entities but decomposed into statistical traces and absorbed into the statistical geometry of latent space; the historical object thus undergoes a double loss, once at the moment of digitisation and again when its digital double is compressed into vectors (Somaini 2026: 34, 36). The trace in Doane's sense is the residue of material contact; the statistical trace is the distribution parameter that remains once contact has been erased.

By *statistical index* this article means the index once the place of the trace has been occupied by statistical traces. The causal guarantee thereby withdraws, while the outward forms of deixis, credibility and the capacity to be taken as evidence remain in place.

The index delivers only the message "I am here"; being uncoded, it must be supplemented by an articulated text, which is why the photograph is so regularly accompanied by a caption (Krauss 1985: 211, 218). The prompt reverses this order: it generates the image from a prior description, what Somaini, following Hannes Bajohr, calls operative ekphrasis (Somaini 2026: 31). The word precedes the image and becomes its cause. What the user faces is an empty input box with a cursor blinking in it. The blank canvas is a material surface, opaque, awaiting paint; the blank prompt box does not await paint, for it is already filled with the parameters of possibility (Somaini 2026: 34). The Suprematist desert was cleared out of what already existed, and after the emptying, feeling still remained; in the prompt box there is nothing to be cleared, and whatever is typed, there will be no content that existed before and is missing afterwards.

Training a diffusion model means adding random perturbations to an image round after round, so that contours, patches of colour and textures are submerged one after another until

only patternless specks remain. These perturbations are noise, and what the network learns is to estimate how much was added in each round. In generation the order is reversed: starting from pure noise, the predicted portion is subtracted round by round, and the image gradually appears. This process takes place in latent space, and the direction of each subtraction is set by the representation of the prompt in that space (Somaini 2026: 31–33). At each step the network outputs not an image but the portion of noise it judges should be subtracted (Rombach et al. 2022: 4). The image is obtained by subtraction. Covering in painting is additive: white paint must be applied layer by layer. In the diffusion process nothing is added; every step removes.

Steyerl calls the portrait a model generated of her a mean image: "All it takes is to remove the noise of reality from my photos and extract the social signal instead; the result is a 'mean image', a rendition of correlated averages" (Steyerl 2023). What is classed as noise are the very details that make a face this face. The noise added in training is random perturbation and indeed contains no content; in Steyerl's portrait, however, the same name covers real details that deviate from the statistical mean. What denoising subtracts, then, is everything that does not fit the learned distribution, and these parts, before being subtracted, have already been judged, under the name of "noise", to contain no content.

A process made up entirely of subtraction ought to leave shortages everywhere; that it does not is due precisely to this naming. Each of Suprematism's withdrawals left an identifiable place, because what was withdrawn was always withdrawn in its own name: when the object was cancelled, what was cancelled was the object; when the canvas was taken away, what was taken away was the canvas; after the withdrawal, what was absent could still be called by its name. "Noise", by contrast, refers to nothing. It is a statistical judgement, indicating only that some portion deviates from the range sanctioned by the distribution. Since what is subtracted has no name, its absence cannot be identified as the absence of something; before subtraction begins, the loss has already, by this naming, ceased to count as a loss.

Somaini sums up this process as reversing entropy: rebuilding order from disorder, the image from noise (Somaini 2026: 33). Formlessness in Suprematism is the desert reached once everything has been emptied; here it is the starting point that must be left behind. The desert is the end point of withdrawal, from which what was withdrawn can be traced back; noise is the starting point of generation, before which nothing has been subtracted.

The prompt box accepts any description, and there is no restriction on what may be written. What is restricted is that, whatever is written, only regions already existing in latent

space can be activated, together with the presences and absences already encoded in them (Somaini 2026: 34). On receiving a prompt, the software is closer to receiving a search command, except that what is searched is not a collection of existing images but the latent space of possible images (Meyer 2025b: 284). Each prompt marks out a region of this space; the parts not marked out do not thereby disappear. They have not been pressed underneath; they have merely not been activated, and can be marked out by the next prompt.

Vilém Flusser places the release of the shutter "in some sense outside the actual gesture, for it proceeds mechanically"; the gesture proper consists of three aspects: "the search for a place, a position from which to observe the situation", "the manipulating of the situation, adapting it to the chosen position", and the "critical distance that makes it possible to see the success or failure of this adaptation" (Flusser 2011: 286–287). In the generative process none of the three exists: there is no position to search for, no situation to manipulate, and the judgement that could be made only at a distance has already been performed by the loss function.

Every image in the training set was once photographed or drawn by someone, and in this sense human making is not absent. Once in training, however, these images, like the rest of the archival material, are decomposed into statistical traces; what generation draws on is a distribution derived statistically from all the training images, and it does not trace back to any one of them. The more makers there are, the less the distribution can be attributed to any one of them. As for execution, how much is subtracted at each step of denoising is calculated by the model according to the learned distribution, and there is no decision in the process for whose reasons anyone could be asked. The act that cancels the presence of the object thus has neither an attributable author nor an identifiable executor.

Non-human viewing and the algorithmic sublime

If the generative side produces no shortage, the viewing side might still produce one: a viewer before the picture could in principle point out what is missing here. Whether such a position remains on the viewing side has yet to be examined. The licence-plate recognition devices described by Trevor Paglen are mounted on police cars, buildings, infrastructure and private vehicles, photographing every car that enters the frame (Paglen 2019: 26). Each of these images is produced by the contact of light, and the causal chain is intact; only the viewer has withdrawn. The two billion photographs uploaded daily to Facebook-controlled platforms are scrutinised by neural networks whether or not anyone has actually looked at them, and the loop

of analysis has no need of humans. Contact and viewing can thus be withdrawn separately: withdraw the former, and the index loses its guarantee; withdraw the latter, and the image is no longer looked at by anyone. The licence-plate photographs withdraw only the latter; the position of viewing itself still exists, and a shortage can still be pointed out by whoever occupies it.

Paglen pushes the question back to the assumption of a human subject, and his reason rests on materials: human eyes are made of flesh, and the history of images is a history of pigments and dyes, oils, acrylics, silver nitrate and gelatin (Paglen 2019: 24). Application and material are precisely the first two of the items that remained in painting after the object was cancelled; their survival presupposed a pair of fleshly eyes facing them. What Paglen discusses, however, is still the recognition and matching of existing images, and so the question stops at who is looking; whether looking itself still constitutes an order does not yet enter the discussion.

This is the level at which Adrian MacKenzie and Anna Munster work. Vision, as the paradigm of seeing and observing, is being hollowed out, and the vacated place is occupied by another kind of perception; platforms make vision itself operational (MacKenzie and Munster 2019: 6). Observation operates in and through images, yet does not belong to the order of the visual; they call this the invisual (MacKenzie and Munster 2019: 7). The models they discuss reverse the direction of image production, using it to observe images rather than to generate them (MacKenzie and Munster 2019: 17). It is Somaini who moves the invisual into latent space, where relations are operationalised but never presented as images to human vision (Somaini 2026: 23).

The two directions cancel the same item: the position of the observer. There is no position or site from which an observing subject could see the whole of image processing at work, and the reason is scale: it is either too small, taking place on the microprocessors of sensors, or too large, spanning image libraries, GPU arrays and server farms (MacKenzie and Munster 2019: 9–10). With the licence-plate photographs only the viewer withdrew; the position of viewing still stood empty and so could still be identified. Once the position itself is cancelled, no one can stand there to point out any shortage.

The cancellation of the position can still be attributed to scale, to the inadequacy of human perception to cover it; a more thoroughgoing step cancels human perception as the measure itself. For Somaini, compression in latent space is quite different from compression of the JPEG

or MP3 kind: the latter take into account the limits and range of human perception, whereas the former is structurally detached from human phenomenology (Somaini 2026: 38). With respect to the first step of compression, however, the opposite holds: the compressed space is perceptually equivalent to image space, and what is discarded is imperceptible detail (Rombach et al. 2022: 2). The criterion for what is kept and what is discarded is still whether the human eye can tell the difference, the same logic as JPEG. The break occurs at the second step: once compression is complete, subtraction proceeds in the compressed space, and from then on no link takes human perception as its reference. Human perception defines the boundary of this space, but the operations within that boundary have nothing to do with it. This is why the whole apparatus prepared for the human eye can operate as usual in the finished product: it acts only at the boundary.

Within this space, the agency at work is non-human, statistical and data-driven; what determines the proximity of things is optimisation, not any set of epistemic rules. Categories such as discourse, author and subject have no counterpart in it; what remains are vectors, embeddings and their statistical proximity to one another (Somaini 2026: 39). To identify a shortage, there must first be a statement about it, and for a statement to hold, there must first be categories such as discourse and subject; here all three are absent. The viewing side therefore produces no shortage: the position on which one could stand has been cancelled, and a statement that could hold cannot be formed.

The threat on which the sublime depends is that nothing might happen; here, the not-happening itself does not happen. Each step of subtraction computes its result on the basis of the learned distribution, so an image necessarily appears, and appears complete. What the threat concerns is not whether a particular generation might fail, but whether the event of generation as such could come to nothing. That it cannot is not because the model is reliable enough, but because there is nowhere for coming to nothing to appear. Noise refers to nothing, so subtraction leaves no shortage; the position of viewing has been cancelled, and no statement can hold. For the threat to hold, there must be a place where it could be noticed that nothing has happened, and such a place no longer exists on either the generative or the viewing side.

Cancellation has not stopped; it is more thorough than any in painting. The presence of the object, the hand that carries out the cancellation, the position of viewing, the persona that utters a statement: each is cancelled in turn. Yet no cancellation leaves a shortage in what is

retained. This configuration is here termed the *algorithmic sublime*.[5] What it retains are the outward forms of the sublime: unsurveyability in scale, the completeness and plenitude of the image, and the sense, before it, of something that cannot be grasped. What is cancelled is the condition on which these forms depend, namely a shortage that can be verified. Cancellations in painting could be identified as cancellations because each left a gap, and someone could point to that gap and say what had been there. The algorithmic sublime leaves no such gap; the outward shape of the sublime thereby remains intact, while the condition that made that shape sublime is no longer there. It is not a new form of the sublime but the sublime in failure.

Conclusion: the limits of the algorithmic sublime

Lyotard's essay closes with a definition: "The sublime feeling is the name of this privation" (Lyotard 1985: 18). The privation he means is not a lack in the content of the picture but the possibility that the event of "it happens" might itself not happen. The question avant-garde art deals with is therefore not what the subject experiences but whether it happens, that is, privation. Whether a shortage can be verified is thus not a requirement added to the sublime from outside, but the condition under which that threat can hold.

On the side of the index, what withdraws is the causal guarantee, while the outward forms of deixis, credibility and the capacity to be taken as evidence remain in full. On the side of the sublime, what withdraws is privation, while magnitude, inexhaustibility and the awe one feels

[5] The term *algorithmic sublime* is formed on the same model as the mystical sublime. To call it sublime does not mean that the sublime acquires a new form in generative images; what it names is precisely the situation in which the outward forms are complete while the condition of occurrence has lapsed, that is, a configuration. In this respect the usage here runs counter to theories of the technological sublime: these discuss how technological objects become new bearers of the sublime, whereas the concern here is a situation in which the bearers are all in place while what they bear is gone (see Nye 1994: 60–62). In such accounts the fear that the sublime involves tends to give way to celebration; what is taken from Lyotard here, by contrast, is precisely the layer in which fear is retained, the step at which the threat falls on the "now". The awe and the sense of being unable to grasp that people do feel before generative images are not denied here; they are facts of feeling. As a category, however, the sublime is determined not by whether the feeling is present but by whether a privation can be experienced.

before it are in no way diminished. The statistical index is to the index as the algorithmic sublime is to the sublime.

Meyer names the archival fantasy underlying generative AI: "there is no outside of the archive", since everything "can be interpolated from what is already stored" (Meyer 2025b: 284). Without an outside, there is no place where anything could be absent. MacKenzie and Munster observe that we have "become used to the mathematical sublime underpinning the term 'big data'", and propose that engagement with technical architectures "offers a way to disinvest some of the numerical sublime that inflects responses to image aggregates" (MacKenzie and Munster 2019: 7, 18). The argument holds for awe produced by ignorance: the awe aroused by magnitude and unsurveyability does diminish as the mechanism becomes known. The algorithmic sublime, however, is not of this kind. It is constituted not by the viewer's ignorance but by the constitution of the apparatus itself: the naming of noise leaves subtraction without shortage, and the position of viewing and the categories of statement are cancelled together. None of this changes when the viewer understands the mechanism; once it is understood, a verifiable shortage still cannot arise.

Lyotard had already identified, in the same essay, the mechanism that takes the place of privation: "Hidden in the cynicism of innovation is certainly the despair that nothing further will happen. But innovating means to behave as though lots of things happened, and to make them happen"; once innovation "works", "the question mark of the 'Is it happening?' stops" (Lyotard 1985: 18). The unpresentable is then no longer the sacred driven to the edge of the picture, but the object that was never present and yet appears in the image complete and intact.

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