

Luke White, “Damien Hirst, Colley Cibber and the Bathos of the Commercialised Sublime,” a paper given at the conference “Taste, Vision, Transcendence: Sublimity 1700-1900,” held at University of Sussex, 5th January 2007.

This document is an expanded version of the paper given at the conference, produced to be placed on my website (<http://homepage.mac.com/lukewhite/>) as a work in progress. Material from it informed a chapter on Hirst and Cibber in my PhD.

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Damien Hirst, Colley Cibber and the Bathos of the Commercialised Sublime

In my paper today, I will trace a history of the sublime which I feel is a necessary supplement to accounts of the development of a 'high', (Romantic) sublime in philosophy, poetry and 'serious' art. My paper is part of a larger project which traces the history of the sublime in relation to the commodification of culture.¹ In it, I contend that the co-temporality of the growth of the commercialisation of culture on the one hand and the development of the category of the sublime on the other is not coincidental (whatever the proponents of Sublimity in philosophy, criticism, painting or poetry may have claimed for themselves). Rather, the sublime – albeit in all kinds of debased forms – was deeply implicated as an aesthetic *imperative* of this commercialised culture, and perhaps indeed even marks the extent to which serious culture was entangled in the same imperative.

My research focuses on tracing this imperative into its "afterlife" in 'postmodern', 'mass' culture. Today, due to shortness of time and space, I will only gesture briefly towards a diverse field of cultural products or practices which might constitute such an afterlife: the *National Geographic* magazine; television documentaries about awesome killer beasts or storms; the tourist's quest for magnificent nature; the technological sublime of cities; all the descendents of the Gothic titillation of terror and dread in fiction, television and film; the very cinematic apparatus itself. I could go on, but will round the list off with the focus of my own inquiry into this field : the spectacular, sensationalist, headline-grabbing, morbid, *über*-Gothic work of artist-cum-celebrity Damien Hirst – an artist who I assume needs little introduction.

In connecting Hirst with the sublime, however, my aim is *not* to make a claim that his work fulfils the promise of cultural value with which the word is loaded. Rather, it is to note that there are traces of the discourse on sublimity deposited in his work. It is packed with the motifs, and the formal or rhetorical techniques – and it aims at the affects – which were privileged in this discourse. On a coarse level, it is as if Burke has been taken by Hirst as a handbook for artistic procedure. Hirst’s *oeuvre* is concerned with a ‘delightful horror’², with overwhelming the spectator through “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”³ It goes about this through the tricks and motifs elucidated by Burke: by scale and repetition, by evoking power, violence or the unimaginable, and, above all, by the evocation of what Burke places at the heart of the sublime and names the “king of terrors”: death.

We don’t have to look far in Hirst’s work to find echoes of the favoured motifs of the Romantic or Gothic products that were associated with the notion of the sublime in its heyday. It is there in Hirst’s titles such as *Standing Alone on the Precipice* *Overlooking the Arctic Wastelands of Pure Terror*, (1999-2000), a vast, mirrored cabinet on the mirrored rows of shelves of which are presented a seemingly astronomical number of different, tiny medical pills. It is a work which itself might be understood to play either on the Burkean ‘artificial infinite’,⁴ or alternatively on the moment Kant notes in his analytic where, as with the pyramids at a certain distance, the detail and the totality cannot easily be synthesised, and our aesthetic comprehension is overwhelmed.⁵

Similar traces of Burkean (or other) ideas of sublimity are also there to be spotted in iconic works such as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone*

Living (1991, Fig. 1). Indeed, the notion of the sublime has repeatedly been brought forth by critics in response to it. Arthur Danto, for example, in his review of the Sensation exhibition, found the “power, sobriety and majesty” of the shark, and its distanced terror to be “precisely what Kant meant by sublimity”.⁶ But I don’t expect I have to labour this point in order to persuade you that there are these echoes of the sublime in Hirst’s work. I take this as self-evident. The problem, rather, is just what they are ‘doing’ there.

The afterlife of the sublime

My premise is that in contemporary mass culture, and thus in the work of Damien Hirst – even without its explicit use as an enabling concept in its production – the discourse on the sublime has a series of ‘*afterlives*’, or, in Freudian language, of ‘uncanny’ and quite ‘*nachträglich*’ returns. This word ‘sublime’ that seemed to fall out of favour in the nineteenth century has not since ceased coming back, in the form of revivals of cultural tropes as much as in philosophical and critical reworkings of the concept.

Damien Hirst and Colley Cibber

To attempt something of an anatomy of the function of the sublime in commercial culture, and a history of its genesis, my conceit in this paper will be to bring together two figures from either end of this history: at one end Damien Hirst and at the other Colley Cibber, who will serve me here primarily as an instrument to illuminate Hirst. Cibber was an early eighteenth-century actor, playwright, theatrical manager, autobiographer, Poet Laureate, and general celebrity, who has come down to us

primarily as the butt of his contemporaries' satire, in particular as the Duncce of Alexander Pope's final version of the *Dunciad*.

There are such a raft of similarities between Hirst and Cibber that, looking at the two of them together for too sustained a period of time, one runs the risk of being overwhelmed by an uncanny loss of the sense of the historical difference between now and the eighteenth century. Hirst and Cibber are both unashamedly commercially driven, populist, middle-brow cultural producers, who worked their way up from being *déclassé* 'outsiders' to command a large fortune.⁷ They have both moved as much as entrepreneurs, impresarios and managers of cultural production as they have as 'artists'. Hirst has produced pop videos and music, and set himself up as restaurateur, publisher, commissioner, curator and collector, as well as running an art-producing industry with over a hundred employees, whilst Cibber, rose to become the most successful theatrical manager of his day. Both Hirst and Cibber are canny manipulators of their own larger-than-life public images, as 'famous for being famous' as they are for their work itself. Cibber in his day was as famous for his extravagant dissoluteness as Hirst was in the nineteen-nineties, when we were as used to seeing his notorious 'bad boy of art' behaviour in the gossip pages as we were seeing his work in the Culture sections of our newspapers.⁸ But if some critics claim that Damien Hirst's greatest creation is "Damien Hirst," Cibber, three centuries before him, was also known for inhabiting off the stage the same foppish character for which he became famous on it. As the *Biographical Dictionary of Actors* notes of the character Sir Novelty Fashion, the part he wrote for himself in his first authored play: "Perhaps it would be truer to say he wrote himself into the play, for it is difficult to distinguish Cibber from the parts he played so well."⁹ In the *Dunciad*, Pope put it

even more wittily, placing the lines into Cibber's mouth: "Did on the stage my fops appear confined? / My life gave ampler lessons to mankind."¹⁰ In fact, according to one of Cibber's biographers the greatest laughs and cheers that Cibber would raise from his audience in the play were when, forgetting his lines, he would take a pinch of snuff, bow elegantly to the leading lady to beg her excuses ("Your humble sa-a-arvant, madam.") amble over to the prompter without breaking character and demand to know "What is next?"¹¹ There is something almost Warholian, *avant-la-lettre*, about Cibber's self-creation, which chimes so strongly with Hirst's¹²...

I could go on, much longer, about the resemblances between Hirst and Cibber, but my point is made in quite enough detail for this paper's purposes. It remains only to note the most important fact: both Hirst and Cibber have been consistently the central objects in their respective moments of satirical and other attacks, in the tabloid, general *and* specialist presses, on the commercialisation of culture; Hirst, that is to say, is often depicted very much as a modern-day 'Dunce', the exemplar of contemporary art's 'Dulness', in a reprieve of a basically Scriblerian motif.¹³

The similarities between Hirst and Cibber stem from a continuity in the mechanisms of commoditised culture - a 'cultural logic of capitalism' – which spans the period here, and within which they have both had to negotiate their places. I have already suggested that I understand the rhetorical technics of the 'sublime' to be implicated in these cultural mechanisms, and it is to understanding in what way this might be that we shall now turn.

Cibber's Critics attack him in terms of the sublime: what this might mean.

The first hint that the sublime is at stake in Cibber might come from his satirists themselves. The most well-known representation of him is Pope's *Dunciad*, a biting satirical attack on the newly commercialising world of the eighteenth-century stage and print industry and the levelling of cultural values which Pope perceived in them. Here, Cibber, the Dunces of the poem's title, stands stage-centre as the apotheosis of everything crass, commercial, ridiculous and, in Pope's word *Dull* in the culture of the day. We also find Cibber parodied within a piece Pope dated in the same year as the first version of the *Dunciad*: his *Peri Bathous*, 'The Art of Sinking', which takes the inverted form of the *Peri Hupsous*, Longinus's treatise on the sublime, "bathos" being the opposite of "hupsos".¹⁴ Here, Pope pretends to give poets advice on properly performing the role of being 'modern': the work is a treatise on how to get things wrong, how to fail and to sink from the sublime into the ridiculous and the dull. Here, the *Dunciad*'s figure of Dulness has its parallel in the notion of Bathos, the 'Sinking' of the title; and from these parallels in both terms and timings, I would argue that a Longinian poetics is also behind the *Dunciad*, and its notion of Dulness, which just like bathos, serves as an antonym of sublimity, a matter of sinking rather than soaring. Both are less a matter of poetic failure, than a metaphysical, moral, cultural condition of entropy and death, to be identified with modernity and capitalism itself.¹⁵

My claim in what follows will be that the use of the sublime to ridicule Cibber is not accidental to his work itself; Longinus is mobilised by Pope because Cibber himself already mobilises something from Longinus; it is this that makes Cibber so vulnerable to satire in such terms. And conversely, it is Cibber's (and modern commercial culture's) *mis*-use of Longinus which is exactly what is so offensive to Pope's Neoclassical sensibilities...

Further credence for the argument that the sublime is at stake in these attacks on Cibber is given by the fact (which we will return to briefly at the end of the paper) that it is again through ironical evocation of Longinus that Fielding was to attack Cibber's autobiography in a series of articles for the *Champion* in the 1740s.

Cibber and the Sublime: Mr Spectator goes to visit...

So what do I mean that Cibber takes up something of the Longinian sublime for his commercial form of theatre? What sort of an appropriation of the sublime is this? And what evidence do I have for this as something which might register in the culture of the time?

For an answer, I will now turn to a short passage by a less hostile critic of Cibber's theatre, where we gain an intimate glimpse of the stage at Drury Lane. This passage is to be found in *Spectator* 546¹⁶ where Mr. Spectator (in this case Steele) visits a rehearsal at Cibber's theatre, in order to check for himself the truth of the furore surrounding Cibber's staging of his translation-*cum*-adaptation of Corneille's *Le Cid* (1636), around which controversy as to its literary merit already raged, even before its performance.

Steele has come to the rehearsal intending to set about approaching the play as a 'text' whose formal and rhetorical properties can be clearly judged. However, what he is faced with in Cibber's rehearsal is a quite different dramatic object, (one which Cibber was soon after to theorise and explicate under his term "theatricality,"¹⁷) an object which seems to resist his (classicist) powers of judgment, and leaves him

rather bewildered; it is a play which relies on an obscure rhetorical technics of sublime affect, rather than the clarity of beautiful form.

Let me quote the passage at length, and then I shall return to pick out the salient points for my argument. Steele writes:

When I came to the Rehearsal, I found [...] that they gave every thing which was said such Grace, Emphasis, and Force in their Action, that it was no easy matter to make any Judgment of the Performance. [...] The Passions of Terrour and Compassion, they made me believe were very artfully raised, and the whole Conduct of the Play artful and surprizing. [...] *Cibber* himself took the liberty to tell me, that he expected I would do him Justice, and allow the Play well-prepared for his Spectators, whatever it was for his Readers. He added very many Particulars not uncurious concerning the manner of taking an Audience, and laying wait not only for their superficial Applause, but also for insinuating into their Affections and Passions, by the artful Management of the Look, Voice, and Gesture of the Speaker. I could not but consent that the Heroick Daughter appeared in the Rehearsal a moving Entertainment wrought out of a great and exemplary Virtue.

If Steele comes looking for the text or form of the play, expecting performance to be a matter of its transparent representation, Cibber is largely dismissive of his work as the kind of purely literary artefact in which these might be distinguished; for him it is primarily an entertainment to be viewed, and not a textual object at all: he wishes it “well-prepared for his Spectators, whatever it was for his Readers.” Steele is rather bewildered to find Cibber waxing lyrical not about what he has wrought in writing the play, but about the techniques of performance he is developing for its presentation - the “artful Management of the Look, Voice and Gesture of the Speaker.”

This shift from the textual to the visual and from the literary to the theatrical also marks a shift from a *poetics of form*, which can be judged rationally and dispassionately (resulting, in Cibber’s terms, in “superficial Applause,” a recognition of merit that does not perturb or move its spectator), towards an *aesthetics of affect*,

moving below the rational 'surface' of mere approval, "insinuating" itself into an audience's "Affectations and Passions" to provide an emotionally compelling experience. This shift from a rational poetics of form to an irrationalist aesthetics of compelling affect and emotion, of course, is that shift which Samuel Holt Monk in his now-classic history of the sublime, and many after him, have identified as the shift brought about by the confrontation of eighteenth-century Neoclassicist rhetoric with Longinus's sublime.¹⁸

It is hardly surprising, then, that amongst the phrases Steele uses to name the affective impact of Cibber's play, those such as "Passions of Terrour and Compassion," and "surprise," which would take their place in the terminology of the discourse of the sublime¹⁹ are prominent. Furthermore, the language Steele has Cibber use to justify his stage-craft seems modelled on that most famous passage in the first chapter of Longinus's treatise, where he describes the power of the sublime orator over his audience, in terms of a power of compulsion, a power to 'transport' them, to throw them in to an 'ecstasy', a power which is so absolute as to amount, in the eroticised terms in which the English criticism of the time translated this passage from Longinus, to a 'ravishment' – or even, in John Dennis's words, a 'pleasing Rape upon the very Soul.'²⁰ If the beautiful merely persuades, the sublime, like Cibber's theatre, demands submission.²¹

The terms in which Steele presents his encounter evidence an ambivalence. As described, there often seems something sinister in Cibber's theatrical power over a viewer: the word "artful", for example, might suggest consummate skill, but also evokes something underhand, and Cibber is presented as "taking and laying in wait"

for an audience, this metaphor of violent (and perhaps sexual) ambush amplifying Longinus's language of dominance, power and mastery. The Cibberian actor is depicted as "insinuating" him- or her-self into the inner being of the spectator. It seems not too far-fetched to suggest that this contains an image of forced sexual as well as emotional penetration or violation. Steele's unease is amplified and given sense by the context of his description of his visit to Cibber's stage within a longer piece which discusses the deceptive, theatrical, illusory practices of salesmanship in the glittering (but not always golden) world of London's bustling shops. However, in spite of these negative terms, Steele also finds Cibber's presentation "not uncurious." The acting method's power to delve into the "Passions and Affectations" remains something which goes beyond the merely "superficial." And ultimately Steele gives his assent to the value of the play. He finds it a "moving Entertainment wrought out of a great and exemplary Virtue." The theatricality of the stage is only ambiguously linked to the unambiguously deceptive theatricality of the display of commodities.

The final impression Steele's encounter leaves on a reader is precisely of his having been overwhelmed and left in a state of some disarray by Cibber's theatrical technique. Just as in Longinus's account of the sublime, his critical judgment, which comes to the theatre to be persuaded, is ultimately quite overcome, and he gives his approval quite in spite of himself, and in spite of everything he starts out thinking a play should be. The wording of his affirmation is telling as to this sense of being compelled against his will: "I *could not but* consent" (my emphasis).

Cibber and the history of the commercialised sublime: coming back to Hirst.

I hope my analysis of this glimpse of Cibber at work evidences the Longinian sublime at work at the heart of an early modern cultural form as it is becoming permeated by the forces of commoditisation. Earlier I suggested that the sublime formed an ‘imperative’ in such commercial culture; I hope that the outline of this imperative is coming into view. As opposed to a formally purist literature, supported by an elite few who know the forms against which to make judgments, a bums-on-seats cultural product such as Cibber’s theatre relies on engineering powerful affects in its audience – in engineering, in Burke’s phrase, “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” – and thus has deep affinities with the overpowering rhetoric which Longinus proposes. I have no interest in whether or not Cibber actually read Longinus’s treatise: a ‘pattern of intention’²² is clearly legible in Steele’s account. Directly or indirectly it is to the Longinian ideas creeping into eighteenth-century criticism and cultural production that he is turning.

Cibber and Garrick: it is through the sublime that theatre becomes ‘modern’.

If Cibber, who has been remembered as ridiculous, and whose central artistic mode was comedy, seems an odd character to associate with the sublime, noting his concern, as Steele does, with ‘Passions of Terrour and Compassion” reminds us that Cibber turned repeatedly, with varying degrees of success, to the serious and tragic. After all, it is in *Cibber’s* adaptation of *Richard III* that Garrick made his name – and in which Shakespeare was resurrected on the stage as *the* important (the sublime?) playwright.²³ In fact, his concern with such acting techniques and their manufacture of affect in an audience places Cibber as the forerunner of Garrick’s more recognisably “sublime” tragic stage techniques, which drew on an increasingly minute taxonomy of the ‘passions’ as reflected in gesture, facial expression and modulations of voice.²⁴

E J Clery's *Rise of Supernatural Fiction* details this celebrated acting technique of Garrick's, and the way that it was involved in the transformation of the acting and its relation to the literary text. Garrick's most celebrated 'set piece' was his playing of Hamlet faced by his father's ghost, which seems to have elicited powerful physical responses in its audience, through Garrick's careful and detailed 'naturalistic' management of his expression. Whilst it had been a commonplace that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was a play whose sublimity could not be represented on the stage (in part because the actors could hardly be expected to convincingly take on the various personas and moods of Hamlet himself), and thus a key example of the inadequacy of theatrical representation to literary merit, Garrick's acting (an "artful Management of the Look, Voice and Gesture of the Speaker"?) presented itself as more than adequate to the task. The horror of the scene was not to be represented simply through the literal transcription of the action, but rather through Garrick's own careful registering of the physiological shadow of changes in Hamlet's own mood. The 'sensitive' audience were filled with terror in a sympathetic identification with Garrick's virtuoso portrayal of Hamlet's responses, rather than by the depiction of the horrid events per se. Clery quotes at length the account Lichtenberg gives of a performance, which reproduces in detail the kinds of techniques that Garrick used, and the powerful effects of sympathetic terror they induced in the audience and in himself. Clery's argument is that the naturalism of Garrick – ironically deployed to its most intense effect in scenes of the supernatural sublime – involved an understanding of human expression which made the body something both naturally communicative, and yet also synthesisable through a codification of its regularities, a process which it seems we are seeing already begun on Cibber's stage during

Steele's visit (it is after all, Drury Lane, the same stage which Garrick himself was later to take over), and which plays the same game of appearing at once as 'nature' and 'technique' as the Longinian sublime.²⁵

To claim a continuity between Cibber's style of acting and Garrick's is, it seems, somewhat controversial, in that Garrick's naturalism is conventionally taken as a decisive break from the more mannered style which preceded it, and with which Cibber is strongly associated. Indeed, this style had already been under attack as 'unnatural', most vocally by Aaron Hill, since the 1720s, and contemporary critics discussed Garrick's new style as the antithesis of this older, Augustan style of drama.²⁶ This verdict on the early eighteenth-century stage is summed up by Leigh Woods. She characterised Augustan drama as an "acting style which stressed speech as its primary expressive mode," one which is essentially "declamatory," and claims that "by 1741, the year of Garrick's debut, there is no evidence to suggest that a change in acting style had emerged."²⁷ However, Cibber's interest in the 'theatrical' and in its use to deliver powerful emotion to the audience belies this claim, and in many ways, even if it remained mannered, and in this failed to match the remit that it set for itself, Cibber's theatrical style started to set up the conditions in which, in a new mutation, Garrick's 'naturalistic' acting can emerge.

Further questions may also be raised about the testament as to the novelty of Garrick's style itself: it also rapidly became 'outdated' by a new generation of actors, was later to be understood mannered, just as Cibber's had been before him.

Theophilus Cibber, Colley's son was already berating Garrick's naturalism as itself a kind of mannerism of effects/affects by 1756: "His over-fondness for extravagant

attitudes, frequently affected starts, convulsive twitchings, jerkings of the body, sprawling of the fingers, flapping the breast and pockets; a set of mechanical motions in constant use; the caricatures of gesture, suggested by pert vivacity; his pantomimical manner of acting, every word in a sentence, his unnatural pauses in the middle of a sentence; his forced conceits; his wilful neglect of harmony, even where the round period of a well-expressed noble sentiment demands a graceful cadence in the delivery.”²⁸

Similarly, it is interesting to note the similarity between the terms with which Garrick’s acting style was lauded with those in which Cibber’s mentor, Betterton, had been praised back in the 1690s: Helene Koon writes of this response to Betterton, citing Thomas Davies: “Even more impressive was his ability to enter into a character; he actually turned pale at the sight of the ghost in *Hamlet*, when ‘his whole body seemed to be affected with a tremour inexpressible ... and this was felt so strongly by the audience that the blood seemed to shudder in their veins likewise.’ ”²⁹

Thus my claim, without denying that there is an important ‘break’ that can be located with Garrick’s innovations, is that the development of this break comes out of the already changing intellectual and technical conditions of the eighteenth-century stage at Drury lane.

Clery, furthermore, notes that in fact “the years of Garrick’s public success coincide with a period of intense interest in public speaking,” and gives evidence for a mutual influence between Garrick’s theatrical techniques and the theories of contemporary books codifying the art of public speaking, and the techniques of its vocal and bodily

deployments. Cibber's theatre thus also foreshadows the late eighteenth-century manuals of techniques for oratorical delivery, and of the bodily gesture and movement which should coincide with it, which are discussed at length in Peter de Bolla's influential book on the *Discourse of the Sublime*.³⁰ In these manuals, the entire array of oratorical gesture, and its motion through the space around the speaker has been codified to the extent that it can be reduced to a notation which can be appended to the read text. This is an interest in a sublime of theatrical gesture which in turn we find echoed in the techniques for conveying powerful emotion in the history paintings of Fuseli and his contemporaries.

My claim, then, is that Cibber's theatrical system has a place within the history of that profound eighteenth-century sea-change of discourses and subjects which de Bolla has analysed as being brought about through the transformational effects of the discourse on the sublime throughout culture, a shift which de Bolla suggests is a key one in our becoming 'modern'.

manufacturing the sublime from Cibber to Hirst: the dilemma of commodified culture

I am also claiming that in commodified cultural production such as Cibber's there is an imperative to *manufacture* the sublime; in order to ensure profit, it must be planned for, and technically produced to order. But this imperative of the sublime in commercialised culture is also paradoxical. The rhetorical sublime, we expect, is something which breaks the 'rules', produces a discursive 'excess', and relies on this for its effect: such an argument is central to Longinus's treatise. Yet, the curious effect of the sublime has been to spawn the most generic forms of cultural product: the Gothic novel would be the paradigmatic example of this, but we might also take,

as examples from the eighteenth century, forms of public entertainment such as Panoramas and Dioramas. Closer to our own day we have the explosion of cinematic genres which rely on it: the horror, thriller, action, disaster, and sci-fi genres, to name the just most prominent.

Or alternatively Damien Hirst, whose signature output is in generic series of works, produced by assistants in a form of sweated production, uncannily like the worst fears for the future of art in commercial society ironically presented in the *Peri Bathous* by Pope, where he imagines artistic production run on the model of the new productive powers of industry with its division of labour.³¹

But if this manufactured culture permanently relies on conjuring discursive excesses, this is also precisely what makes it prone to lapses into the ridiculous. It is this pretension to the sublime which made Cibber so vulnerable to satire in precisely the terms of an inverted *hupsos*. The excess involved in such a sublimity is always prone to being merely overblown, lapsing into bathos; it is recognisable as such in particular as it becomes formulaic: hence the series of negative terms which quickly surrounded the notion of the sublime in eighteenth century, in order to separate the truly sublime from its false or failing counterparts: the 'fustian', 'pompous', 'turgid', 'florid', and 'bombastic'. Populist art, like Hirst's and Cibber's, in its constant conjuring of the excess which should provide its viewers with the thrilling affects they expect, is always perched precariously between the sublime and the ridiculous, the astonishing and the banal, hupsous and bathos.

Conclusion (or, rather, post-script): Fielding on Cibber.

To round, off, then, I'd like to turn briefly to Fielding. On the occasion of the publication of Cibber's autobiography (the *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*) in 1740,³² Fielding resurrected the basic joke of Pope's *Peri Bathous* to mount a sustained attack on Cibber's generally incompetent prose style in a series of articles in the *Champion*.³³ He pulls out a series of examples of Cibber's grammatical and syntactical errors (and even sentences that just make no sense whatsoever), pretending to laud them as Longinian tropes, where a 'mastery' over language is manifested in a disregard of its rules, with Homer "torturing his line"³⁴ and bending language out of shape. Fielding writes that "our great Master" (i.e. Cibber) equally "hath tortured" his language, in an assertion of his "absolute Power" over it.³⁵

The next week he carries on, expanding his satire:

Now in all these Instances, tho' a Boldness of Expression is made use of, which none but great Masters dare attempt [...] yet we may with some little Difficulty without the least help of Grammar, have a guess at his Meaning. But there are other parts of his Work so very sublime, that Grammar offers you its Aid in vain; the following Stile carries a βίαν ἀμαχον [see *Peri Hupsous*, 1.4: "irresistible power"], according to *Longinus*, along with it, and *absolutely overpowers* the Reader [...] so can our Author; this Stile comes upon you, says the former Critic like a *Thunderbolt*, or to use a Word which may give a more familiar Idea to my Reader, like a *Blunderbuss*, and carries all before it.³⁶

I feel that the echoes between this mock-Longinian passage and Steele's account of Cibber's own ambitions to overpower the theatrical spectator need little comment. However, as with Steele at the theatre, the text rather eludes the classicist tools Fielding brings to it. Like his stage-craft, Cibber's formless and unfocused autobiography is utterly unconcerned with the question of good literary form or style; one might go as far as to say that it is consummately badly-written; but in spite of this it is also an eminently readable and lively work, highly enjoyable, even today.³⁷

Thus the ironical devices of Fielding's satirical attack rebound on his intentions; his mock-judgments are more apt than he intends; they capture something of the double-edged nature of commercialised culture's pact with the sublime. The phrase that Fielding uses to condemn Cibber's style, which stumbles along in shocks and starts, by turns raising itself up into sublime intensities and then falling into the bathetic and dull³⁸, is deeply apt to characterise the rhetorical economy of a string of cultural products spanning the last quarter of a millennium, which connect Cibber to his contemporary time-twin, Hirst. Cibber, according to Fielding, in words which might equally apply to Hirst, "ascends into the elevated and nervously pompous Elements of the Sublime."³⁹

Endnotes

¹ For more of my work-in-progress on this topic, see my homepage, <http://homepage.mac.com/lukewhite/diss_main.html>

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Wormersley, (London: Penguin 1998), Part II, Section IX, 115. Burke here calls this 'delightful horror' "the most genuine effect, and the truest test of the sublime."

³ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, Part I, Section VII, 86. If for Burke the sublime can be defined in terms of being such a zenith of emotional response, it is worthwhile noting that Hirst's own account of his intentions in his work, even if it isn't explicitly introduced in terms of a concept of sublimity, is frequently discussed in terms of the imperative to produce in the viewer an intense emotional reaction. See for example, Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, *On the Way to Work* (London: Faber, 2001), 19: "with all good art I just want to feel something about my existence or something. [...] Even if it's just laughing hysterically, I want to feel something. I just want to *feel*." If Burke is surprising as an eighteenth century writer for being a thinker of the sublime not as a matter of transcendence, but as one of maximum immanent intensity, there is in Hirst at least the pretension to an art which would take this on as a programme.

⁴ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, Part II, Section IX, 116.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §26. Available online, Project Gutenberg-DE <<http://Gutenberg.Spiegel.de/kant/kuk/kuk.htm>> 2000. Visited October 2003.

⁶ Arthur Danto, "'Sensation' in Brooklyn," *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World*, (Los Angeles and London: U of California P, 2001), 397. For other critics attempts to apply the notion of the sublime see, for example, Jonathan Jones, "He's Gotta Have It," *Guardian*, Special Section: "Saatchi: The Collector's Issue," (4th April 2001): 14; Laura Wixley Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, ed. Paul Crowther, (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 54-67; Gene Ray, "Little Glass House of Horrors: High Art Lite, the Culture Industry and Damien Hirst," *Third Text* 18.2 (2004): 119-33.

⁷ See, for example, Tom Crow's *Modern Art and the Common Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale U P, 1996) for more on the way that high culture appropriates what (and by extension, who) is 'outside' and 'below' it, pulling these practices and figures inwards from its margins to its centre, as grist to its mill in the production of novelty, meaning and affect. The trajectories of Hirst and Cibber as subjects of cultural production could be understood in just these terms of the way that capitalist culture, high or low, draws repeatedly and parasitically on the energies of 'othernesses', in a rhythm that involves capture, neutralisation, and then the need to start again with another element of alterity. This is, as Crow points out, an ambivalent movement; how one is to evaluate the process depends on what point of the cycle one stresses, or from which one views the process. There are moments both of 'subversion' but also of capture. The radical hope within the process is that the system structurally depends on alterities which threaten to undermine its logic; the pessimistic fear is that this is a system, however delicate the balance may be, which also functions as an efficient machine to neutralise and recuperate any threat to it.

⁸ See Glover, "Nobility, Visibility and Publicity in Colley Cibber's *Apology*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 22.3 (2002): 538, who claims that he was in fact one of 'the first celebrities' as we now understand the term.

⁹ "Cibber, Colley," *Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, eds. Philip H. Highfill Jr., Kalman A. Burnum and Edward A. Langhans, Vol. 3, (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois U P, 1975), 216.

¹⁰ Alexander Pope, "The *Dunciad* in Four Books," Book 1, ll.191-2, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, Ed. James Sutherland, 3rd ed., Vol. 5, (London: Methuen, 1963), 283.

¹¹ Helene Koon, *Colley Cibber: A Biography* (Lexington: U P of Kentucky, 1986), 109.

¹² The problem which Hirst and Cibber have both faced as 'outsiders' of moulding themselves into authoritative cultural figures, is not one which itself is divorced from the question of the sublime. Their problem can be understood as one of taking, as speaking subjects, the position of Longinus's sublime orator, the subject of full, sublime speech or representation, a position which is, of course, classed and gendered. Hirst's and Cibber's self-constructions both involve a form of masquerade (of class and gender amongst other things), even if their masquerades take different forms, due to their different moments and social positions. Both however, face the problem of emulation, and there is a certain impossibility of coinciding, as commercial artists (and as classed 'outsiders' who need commercial success) with a (sublime) position which is supposedly beyond the paltry everyday concerns of making money from culture. Both artists are thus deeply vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism, insincerity and manipulation, and they have also been forced into a peculiar condition of ironised enunciation in which the self can never (appear to) fully coincide with itself, but is always bracketed aside from and in relation to the ideal (sublime) position of enunciation. This is visible in Hirst's speech in interviews. Take, for example, his infamous pronouncement that the subject of his work is "life and death and all that stuff." Here, in the very moment in which we see Hirst attempt to embrace 'serious' and even 'sublime' themes (of 'life and death'), he seems forced to undermine this with the dismissively offhand phrasing ('and all that stuff'). This same form of ironised enunciation can be seen in his work itself, where the (Burkean) 'sublime' issues of terror and mortality are constantly raised, but only on the proviso that they are constantly undermined by the deadpan presentation, and by the introduction of the ridiculous, in the form of Hirst's laddish, crude and infantile humour. Brian Glover has noted that Cibber's autobiography seems to involve an equally split subject. In it, Cibber appears at once as the ridiculous object of the text, and yet also as the wise writing subject who can depict this creature and display him for our judgment. Glover notes how compromised the possibility of 'living' such a contradiction as a coherent self is. For more on Cibber's problematic path into subjectivity, see Glover, 523-39. Full development of these issues, however, is beyond the remit of this paper.

¹³ For a recent incident which emphasises the extent to which Hirst's characterisation in discourses of contemporary art is replayed through the kind of pattern set up in Scriblerian attacks on the commercial culture of the early eighteenth century, see Jonathan Jones's 'blog' on the Guardian website. A recent entry in which Jones recants his previous excitement and enthusiasm for Hirst provoked an avalanche of comment, criticising Jones for ever having supported Hirst in the first place. Amongst

this comment, one respondent, 'sbsmith', launched into a series of lengthy verse satires of modern art and letters in general (from Marcel Duchamp to Jacques Derrida), in a rather convincing pastiche of Pope's style, taking Hirst as the central 'Dunce' of the satire. Interestingly, 'sbsmith' even goes as far in their emulation of Pope's *Dunciad* as to set up the same two-pronged attack on contemporary culture, identifying in it a twin malaise consisting on the one hand of culture's submission to market forces (embodied for Pope by Cibber), and on the other its submission to a professionalised scholarly discourse (embodied for Pope by Theobald, the dunce of the first versions of the poem). Jones's article, sbsmith's poem and the various responses to both are available online: Jonathan Jones, "Fresh Out of Ideas," *Guardian Unlimited*, Comment is Free, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1930623,00.html>> 25 October 2006, visited 31 October 2006.

¹⁴ Alexander Pope, "Peri Bathous, or, the Art of Sinking in Poetry," *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 387-438.

¹⁵ The identification between this 'bathos' and the rise of the new forms of production and consumption of early capitalism is particularly explicit in the Art of Sinking, especially in the opening chapters and towards the end where Pope imagines the reform of letters on the principles of new forms of commodity manufacturing. Pope, "Peri Bathous," 389-91; 428-38.

¹⁶ Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele *The Spectator in Four Volumes*, volume 3, issue 546 (Wed. Nov 26, 1712), Project Gutenberg, electronic edition of Henry Morley's 1891 edition, <<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/2/0/3/12030/12030-h/12030-h.htm>> updated 14 April 2004, visited May 2004.

¹⁷ Cibber does this in the Preface to this very play, written for its publication in 1719, in which he discusses and defends his adaptation of the play, and the methods used to transform it from a literary work into a successfully stageable and entertaining production. Cibber, *Ximena, or The Heroick Daughter* (London, 1719). Cibber's preface is further discussed in Helen Koon, *Colley Cibber: A Biography* (Lexington: U P of Kentucky, 1986). She summarises that the position here, just as we find it in Steele's encounter, is that Cibber "considers the effect of a play on the audience to be paramount" and claims that "he aims for a strong impact by using the stage's resources: visual and audio effects, variety in scene and costume, unusual characterisations." (93)

¹⁸ Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1960). See pp.1-9 for a summary of the book's argument in this regard.

¹⁹ For the relation between 'sublime and the pathetic' see Monk, 43-62; by the time of Steele's visit, Dennis (who was one such writer interested in the 'sublime and pathetic', was known to his contemporaries as "The Critick" and satirised by the Scriblerians under the name 'Sir Tremendous Longinus' for his interest in the *Peri Hupsous*) had already (in 1704) foregrounded the terrible as the emotion most conducive to the sublime (see Monk, 51-4); directly or indirectly, Dennis's stress on this 'enthusiastic terror' in his account of sublimity must have been an important influence on Burke's theories (Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, Part II, Section II, 101); For 'surprise' as a notion linked to the sublime, we need only look, once more, to Burke, (*Philosophical Enquiry*, Part I, Section III, 82). For a sustained discussion of

the important role of “compassion” itself in Burke’s account of the sublime, see Luke Gibbons *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonial Sublime*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2003). As well as being a prominent theme in Monk, (43-62, as above), the links between compassion, sympathy and notions of the sublime are also brought to the fore in the selection of essays collected by Ashfield and de Bolla in their reader, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1996).

²⁰ John Dennis, “The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry,” [1704] *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, Vol. 2 (of 2), (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1943), 459, cited in Monk, 53. Dennis is here discussing Longinus and paraphrases the relevant passage thus: the sublime “does not so properly persuade us, as it ravishes and transports us, and produces in us a certain Admiration, mingled with Astonishment and Surprize, which is quite another thing than the barely pleasing, or the barely persuading; that it gives a noble Vigour to a Discourse, an invincible Force, which commits a pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the Reader; that whenever it breaks out where it ought to do, like the artillery of Jove, it thunders, blazes, and strikes at once, and shews all the united Force of a Writer.”

²¹ In his 1743 translation William Smith phrases the Longinus passage thus: “the sublime not only persuades, but even throws an audience into transport. The marvelous always works with more surprising force, than that which merely persuades or delights. In most cases, it is wholly in our own power, either to resist or to yield to persuasion. But the sublime, endued with strength irresistible, strikes home, and triumphs over every hearer [...]; the sublime, when seasonably addressed, with the rapid force of lightning has borne down all before it, and shown at one stroke the compacted might of genius.” Ashfield and de Bolla, 22. In this eighteenth-century translation, as with the Dennis (which directly or indirectly informs it), Longinus’s discussion of the sublime in terms of a power struggle between the orator/poet and the audience/reader becomes increasingly an eroticized struggle of sexual domination.

²² I draw the notion from Michael Baxandall’s *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale U P, 1985).

²³ See Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1998).

²⁴ E. J. Clery’s *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 37-49.

²⁵ Clery describes Garrick thus: “Garrick’s gift was wonderful, but it was not, to the trained eye, incalculable, inexplicable, or even unpredictable. For behind the miracle of acting lay a body of knowledge, a knowledge of the body – a taxonomy of the passions.” (Clery, 43)

²⁶ Koon, 154

²⁷ Leigh Woods, *Garrick Claims the Stage: Acting as a Social Emblem in Eighteenth-Century England* Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies 10, (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1984), 30-1.

²⁸ Theophilus Cibber, *Two Dissertations on The Theatres* (London, 1756)

²⁹ Koon, 16, citing Davies, *Dramatic Miscellanies* Vol.1 of 3, (London 1758), 58.

³⁰ Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 143-185.

³¹ Pope, "Peri Bathous," 428-30.

³² Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber: With an Historical View of the Stage During his own Time*, ed. B.R.S. Fone, (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1968).

³³ See the issues of 22 and 29 April 1740, in Henry Fielding, *Contributions to the Champion and Related Writings*, ed. W. B. Coley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) 292-6

³⁴ It is Longinus, 10.6 that Fielding is citing here. Longinus praises a passage where Homer displays an ability to produce the sublime through an audacious juxtaposition of terms which strains the very coherence of Greek syntax. W. Rhys Roberts' translates Longinus thus: "he has in the words *hypek thanatio*, forced into union, by a kind of unnatural compulsion, prepositions not usually compounded. He has thus tortured his line into the similitude of the impending calamity". *Longinus on the Sublime: The Greek Text Edited After the Paris Manuscript*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1899) available online: Peitho's Web <<http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/longinus/index.html>> visited October 2005.

³⁵ Fielding, 293.

³⁶ Fielding, 296.

³⁷ The outraged Fielding, of course, would never agree to this judgment. As a Justice of the Peace, he is rumoured to have actually written out a warrant for Cibber's arrest for "Murder of the English Language"!

³⁸ Cibber himself has few pretensions for the literary merit of his work. In the *Apology* itself he pre-empts his critics, describing his work thus: "my style is unequal, pert, and frothy, patch'd and party-colour'd like the Coat of an Harlequin; low and pompous, cramm'd with Epithets, strew'd with Scraps of second-hand Latin from common Quotations." To the forefront in his auto-critique, which makes central a series of 'false' sublimines (the pompous, pert, crammed, etc.), is a recognition of a sort of (highly-sytrung?) excess at the heart of the style, its constant over-reaching of itself, and the centrality of (the aspiration to) sublimity and (the achievement of) bathos in its rhetorical economy.

³⁹ Fielding, 297.