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Cherubini’s Elisa: Alpine Virtue During the Terror

The Genoese painter Florindo has arrived at the Mont St Bernard hospice [PIC 1] at a pass on the ridge between the highest summits of the Alps to forget his beloved Elisa, whose tyrannical father has forbidden their marriage. When he learns (by letter) that Elisa has apparently married another, he is consumed with hatred of humanity – his belief in virtue, love and friendship dashed – and seeks death among the rocks and glaciers. [PIC 2] Meanwhile, Elisa arrives at the hospice as night falls; her father has died and she is now free to marry her love, for whom she has been looking all over Italy and Switzerland. On hearing her story, the prior of the hospice realises that her love is Florindo. Elisa sets off into the stormy night in search of him, with monks and mountain guides from the hospice [PIC 3]. ‘Having plunged him into the abyss’, she sings, ‘I fly to his rescue’.

Florindo appears up on the glacier. He has asked the mule driver Michel the location of the Colline des Morts, where, he claims, ‘a great flood of snow rushes in a rapid torrent, taking everything in its wake’. Michel points across the valley, and they watch ice break off the mountain peak and crash down into a ravine. [PIC 4] As Florindo presses on alone, the storm worsens. Michel is joined by Eliza’s party, and together they look down into the valley and see the Pont du diable being swept away (visible in pic). They catch sight of Florindo at the foot of the Colline des Morts and on the edge of the ravine. He looks up and sees them, but it is too late: an avalanche carries him down into the abyss. [PIC 5] The party springs into action. Some climb down into the ravine and start digging. The storm calms, the stage gradually lightens, and they eventually find Florindo and bring him back to the surface, half covered in
snow, apparently dead. But he starts to move and returns to life (from ‘the horror of nothingness to the arms of his love’, as the rescuer’s cry). He and Eliza declare their love for each other, and all celebrate ‘virtuous love’.i

Cherubini’s two-act opéra comique, Eliza, ou le voyage aux glaciers du Mont Blanc received its premier at the Théâtre Feydeau in Paris on 13 December 1794.ii Critics were appropriately awestruck (SLIDE): ‘[the stage was] entirely covered with bridges, ice, precipices and torrents’…

(There was no scene change between the two acts, and the various heights and depths and different planes referred to in the libretto were all presented simultaneously. The set was designed by the Degotti brothers Ignazio and Ilario in partnership with machinist Boullet (who had been poached from the Opéra in 1791). They specialised in strongly characterised and complex scenes, often depicting the overwhelming forces of nature over man.)

Continuing…:

…‘The avalanche was rendered with striking realism. None of our theatres has created a tableau so faithful to nature’s great phenomena’. Indeed, for some the spectacle was almost too much: ‘although the décor was realistic, it was shocking … apart from the very front of the stage, everything was covered chaotically with mountain paths, bridges, ravines, glaciers, icefalls, etc. Perhaps the objects were piled up too much’. This overwhelming visual disorder was carried through into the score too: ‘there was a luxury of excessive music’.iii
The opera captures the phenomenal interest in the Alps in the 1790s, and offers an index of the physical and imaginative geography of the landscape. With the expansion of the Grand Tour into Switzerland, the Alps had become a favoured place to experience 'great and powerful sensations', and excitement built around the race to the summit of Mont Blanc [PIC 7]. In August 1786, the chamois hunter Jacques Balmat and local doctor Michel Paccard were the first to reach the top, but their achievement was eclipsed by that of Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (on the right), whose ascent the following year (assisted by Balmat) involved a programme of experiments and observations, and was recounted in his Relation abrégée d'un voyage [PIC 8]. This text had an immediate cultural impact with its emphasis on the physical and mental hardships of Alpinism, and he gained a reputation as a new kind of romantic hero, defined and elevated by the sublimity of his achievements.

Other memoirs, letters and scientific accounts flooded the market, and bear witness to a fascination with verticality. Marc-Théodore Bourrit’s 1791 Itinéraire de Genève, Lausanne et Chamouni (on the right) – from which the images we’ve just seen were taken – expressed vividly the twin ideas of terror and admiration that were beginning to take hold in the literature. Increasingly, extremes of height and depth, fear and awe, became entwined, and the contradictory feelings experienced in the face of nature’s majesty were acknowledged. In other words, the mountains had evolved into a ‘lieu sublime’.

Such encounters with the natural sublime have tended to be read, following Kant, as essentially free from cultural and political bias, as the disinterested transcendence of empirical phenomena. But Cian [Kee-an] Duffy has argued that by
the late eighteenth century, the Alps had become a ‘classic ground’, a landscape with profound implications for an individual’s understanding of science, religion, politics, individual subjectivity and civil society. Duffy has sketched out a ‘discourse of ascent’ – linking the physical climb with spiritual elevation – and explored the inscription of cultural values onto the experience of the Alpine landscape, and its subsequent mediation and remediation.

Duffy is concerned with British culture and with written narrative accounts (notably the poetry of Shelley and Wordsworth), but his principle of an Alpine ‘classic ground’ can be explored fruitfully in relation to theatrical spectacle and politics in 1790s Paris. Indeed, Michael Fend has explained how at one level the libretto for Eliza was a sort of digest of attitudes disseminated by contemporary French and Swiss Alpine literature [PIC 11] – you can see some of the key locations in the opera feature in Bourrit’s lovely map of the Mont Blanc region. But Fend also emphasises the importance of the opera’s moral message during the Terror (the bloody year of Robespierre’s tyranny in 1793–94). As a former royalist stronghold, the Théâtre Feydeau had to demonstrate its support for the new regime, propagating civic virtues and providing positive models of behaviour. It is the community of monks from the hospice who rescue Florindo and, for Fend, emerge as the real heroes of the drama, capturing the approved Republican spirit of collective will. In other words, the opera had a political relevance to Parisians that extended beyond the broader appeal of the Alps to armchair tourists.

Today, I’m interested in pushing further the double objectives of Duffy and Fend (who both focus on the uplifting quality of the mountainscape and its people). I want
to locate the downward rush of the opera’s avalanche more precisely in relation to the political climate of 1794, following Robespierre’s dramatic fall and the end of the Terror, which took place just a few months before the opera’s premiere. I’ll begin by demonstrating how the onstage audio-visual spectacle of the avalanche captured something of the sublime Alpine experience reported in the literature. The fictional pursuit of the sublime becomes a sublime experience in the opera house. But I’ll then argue that this theatrical thrill is inseparable from the Revolution, as memories of intensely lived experience magnified the emotional impact of the spectacle. The critical figure of the abyss helps us engage with the political mood of the moment: a collective vertigo. As the nation found itself peering over the edge following Robespierre’s fall, I suggest that the opera’s audience was plunged emotionally into the depths, and then propelled upwards and projected forward into a transcendent future, in a cathartic release.

* * *

But first a reminder of how and why mountains were brought into Revolutionary discourse in the first place. [PIC 12] There was a longstanding tradition of eulogising the Alps as a bastion of ancient republican virtue and democracy, rooted in Switzerland’s political history: the link between landscape and liberty was key. And love of mountains had become a marker of a superior soul since Rousseau’s description of the Valais (where the opera is set) in his novel Julie, ou la nouvelle Eloïse (1761). This idea became a central principle of revolutionary politics in France; Robespierre claimed [SLIDE] ‘he who flees the tumult of the cities to raise himself to the summit of the mountains feels the calm of nature penetrate his soul and his ideas are enlarged with the horizon’. For both men, this emotional state
consoled and elevated the soul, allowing one to melt into infinite goodness, to fuse with the collectivity of the people, and achieve a virtuous state. For Robespierre, it followed that the individual would identify himself with the general will of the whole community, achieving moral liberty and virtue through political activity.

The Alpine heights, site of purity and moral and spiritual elevation, were also translated more literally into the landscape of government, the Constituent Assembly. Robespierre’s radicals became known as the party of the Mountain, after the high wall of the left-wing of the Assembly where they chose to sit (– 19C representations). When in June 1794, Robespierre presided over the Festival of the Supreme Being, dazzling light and colour illuminated an artificial mountain, and hymns were sung to the future regeneration of the French Republic. A symbolic invocation to mountain virtue, the festival was at once a celebration of Rousseau’s Alpine virtue and the virtue of the Republic’s Montagnard faction, who now controlled the government.

But Robespierre’s fall when it came was swift: on 26 July 1794 (8 Thermidor in the revolutionary calendar) he delivered a two-hour speech, defending himself against charges of dictatorship and tyranny, and warning of a conspiracy against the republic. He was denounced by the Convention and his arrest was ordered (along with that of his fellow Jacobins). They were rounded up and guillotined without trial the following day [PIC 16 – a contemporary allegorical representation, which captures something of the drama and sense of a fall]. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the wake of this precipitous action, the succeeding government was fragile; revenge attacks came from both sides, many went into exile, committed suicide or were
executed. The uncertain foundations of the new era – and the possibility of a further fall – were felt by everyone.xix

The idea of standing on the edge is familiar in narrative histories of the French Revolution, as successive attempts at democratic government collapsed.xx Dutch philosopher Eelco Runia has suggested that the depth of the void at such sublime moments of possibility can be fathomed only by giving into this ‘vertigo’, breaking the unbearable tension between a desire to jump and fear of falling.xxxi Robespierre’s fellow orator Saint-Just is just one contemporary who articulated the idea of the Revolution as an abyss: ‘a vertiginous freedom of movement towards the infinite’.xxii When they brought about the end of the Terror, the French again jumped collectively into the abyss. [PIC 17]

Vertigo was understood at the end of the eighteenth century as a medical condition.xxxii For Ménuret de Chambaud, writing in the Encyclopédie, ideopathic vertigo (manifest in a loss of balance) could be triggered by extremes of temperature – notably cold weather – and led to a drowsy state with the appearance of death. One might diagnose Florindo with exactly this condition. But modern commentators have interpreted vertigo in late eighteenth-century France as a desire for chaos and confusion, at a time when society was particularly ordered and controlled (whether by the king or subsequently by Robespierre). Indeed, Runia has proposed that Robespierre’s fall unblocked the paralysis of republican virtue, in which individual freedom had been repressed in the interests of collective will.xxxiv
This simultaneous desire for and fear of the abyss that apparently gripped France in July 1794 is implied in Edmund Burke’s perspective on the sublime: if we look up at a mountain the sight is awesome and pleasurable, but if we are looking down from a height, the pleasure is etched with horror. This too seems to be captured by Florindo’s experience in the high mountains: his desire to jump is countered by fear; the full vertical plane of his plunge is sculpted in the libretto, staging and (as we shall see) the music. Put slightly differently, the vertiginous sense of the nation on the edge offers a lens through which to understand the grammar and the symbolism, the aesthetic effect and political implications, of this theatrical avalanche – and the message of hope it ultimately offered.xxv

In this climactic scene, waves of downward movement in the score, suggestive of nature’s destructive force, plunge Florindo rapidly towards his death – and convey his sense of disorientation. After a frozen moment of realisation from the onlookers, this motion almost seamlessly switches to upward waves of human love and hope, as he is gradually dug out and brought to the surface.

The scene begins with the arrival of the storm (in D minor), which sweeps Eliza and her party up, capturing the power of nature and the rescuers’ emotions. Fear for Florindo out in the snow, and determination to find him, are conveyed by the simple but insistent upward scalic and arpeggiated motifs in the violins, while cellos establish a swinging rhythmic momentum in 3/4, with plunging, swooping chords in violas and double basses; timpani assert the tonic/dominant propulsion and a reassuring sense of inevitability. Voices pass fragments to each other ‘il veut périr! Moment terrible! Il faut courir!’ [he wants to die! What a terrible moment! He must
run!]. Over a rising crescendo of tremolo strings, the thunder gets louder, the main characters leave the stage and the chorus narrates: ‘Courrons au précipice, empêche qu’il périsse’ [let’s run to the precipice, stop him from perishing!]. This extended upward wave of music carries them off on their mission, foreshadowing the rescue at the end of the scene. [PLAY – 1m – old recording in Italian]

Our perspective in the next two scenes is from the top of the precipice: first we see Florindo climb down, seeking oblivion, then as he disappears we are joined at the edge by the other characters trying to spot him. Undulating semiquavers in the violins over tremolos, and occasional rumbles of thunder, create a sense of anticipation. The rescuers finally spot Florindo, and he sees them and calls up: his shout traces a slowly descending line through an octave, from a high Ab to C that anticipates his imminent fall; Eliza’s reply charts a slow climb back up from C through Ab to a long, held tonic high Bb – suggestive of the subsequent rescue. But the avalanche is suddenly unleashed: the onlookers describe its approach and Florindo is swept away with a teeming fortissimo descent over a D pedal. [PIC 12 + PLAY – play from c.1m20; see it coming ‘alas/ohime!’ from 1m 57; aftermath of avalanche from 2m29 – STOP soon after]

[Blank SLIDE] Some of the guides climb down into the ravine, some remain at the top; they call to each other, articulating the spatial distance. Descending scales continue, but gradually become more fragmentary, interspersed with tentatively rising violin motifs, as the force of nature gradually gives way to that of the rescue party. As the out-of-sight guides below report hearing Florindo’s cries, momentum begins to build: the speed picks up, rising motifs in the orchestra and voices
gradually come together more forcefully. Florindo is found, and the two choruses join together. He is brought to the surface on waves of rising strings, and gradually returns to consciousness; static repeating figures re-establish the joyful Bb major tonic. [PLAY from 4m40 to about 5m30]

Through this long scene of the avalanche and rescue, there is no discernible large-scale thematic development, and instead chords are extended through continuous repetition and arpeggios, and scalar figures are repeated and sequenced, all within a relatively static harmonic framework. In other words, the music is propelled at surface level by its rhythmic energy, and by strong waves of downwards then upwards motion. Fend has suggested that the vocal writing articulates the extreme feeling caused by the avalanche, while the orchestral scales and sequential motifs (and choral exclamations) paint the object of this feeling. Together they convey the overpowering effect of a sublime natural and moral event. Put slightly differently, recurring cadences suspend the passing of time; we sense the whole through the experience of its individual components (visually as well as musically), but cannot quite grasp its entirety. In his 1785 essay *De la musique*, Chabanon had asserted that music pleased independently of imitation, through a direct appeal to the senses. Here, the ear and eye are exhausted – as contemporary critics complained – by the excess of effects; the audience experienced a sensory overload and disorientation.

We see something similar at work in Cherubini’s 1791 opera *Lodoiska*, as I have argued elsewhere, with the concluding conflagration of the castle and rescue of the prisoners. But whereas that tableau, accompanied by an upward thrusting orchestra seemed to capture something of the idealistic, optimistic belief in revolutionary power
in 1791, scenic and aural excess here suggest the vertigo experienced with the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror in 1794, when the nation found itself once again on the edge of the unknown.

Nevertheless, the avalanche itself is quick; it is the ensuing human endeavour (deploying the same musical devices) that carries the weight of the scene: the search for and then raising of Florindo to the surface is much more gradual. The destructive force of nature, in other words, is sublimated in human virtue.

CONCLUSION
Discourses around the revolution attest to perceptions of political events as ‘sublime’ in their overwhelming power, by equation with nature. Orators (in the manner of Alpine explorers) appropriated this sublime force. In the theatre, the chaotic excess of the staging and music in the climactic scenes of a number of operas melded fictional and lived political experiences in a metissage of sensory confusion.xxvi

Although Eliza was conceived in 1793, at the height of the Terror, and obediently met the demands of the Republic with its narrative of a heroic community spirit, it was realised five months after Robespierre’s fall in 1794. In this new political climate, I suggest, audiences instinctively inhabited the sensory, emotional drama of the opera, experiencing Florindo’s vertiginous fall and sublimation, as the nation’s own plunge into the abyss and liberation from the Terror. In other words, the audience was offered the means by which to assimilate the trauma of the Terror and their triggering of Robespierre’s fall, in a safe, communal space.
In fact, for the survivors of Thermidor, another event anticipated this celebration of virtuous love, liberation and hope for the future, and allowed them to reclaim a more generous version of Robespierre’s *Terroriste* Rousseau – who had been the model for Republican virtue (whereby private desires had to bend to the general will). On 15 October 1794, Rousseau’s ashes had been brought back from Switzerland and interred in the new Pantheon (*housing ‘the great French men of freedom’*).[SLIDE] A hymn, whose verses were sung (variously) by groups of older men, mothers, and citizens of Geneva begged Rousseau to ‘Accept the homage of a proud, free people’, and the oration concluded:

‘It is to Rousseau that we owe this salutary regeneration which has caused such fortunate changes in our morals, in our customs, in our laws, in our minds, and in our habits…. He has led Nature back from where she had gone astray….’

In *Eliza* a couple of months later, it was this sense of liberty that dominated the final scene, the quasi-spiritual ‘discourse of ascent’ (in Duffy’s conception) that finally emerges (and Saint-Just’s ‘freedom of movement towards the infinite’), all the more powerful for its surfacing from the depths.
NOTES:

Emanuele: too much to represent, so the music and spectacle disappoint? Can’t represent the unrepresentable… Capture the anxiety of the nation (rather than sublime thrill etc)? Anxious music – not real downward plunges, but rather tame downward figures that are quite static

Elaine: Hilelr translated into French? Two Burkes: The rev writings (not much known by the French?) and the earlier sublime Burke.

Fran: Genre and opera – anything else this spectacular at the time in the theatres?

Gundula: German mountain movies of the 1920s all about the physical aspect of climbing; this is all metaphorical. Space rather than time (i.e. different to the German interest in climbing and looking at the panorama, control). More about the vertical and downwards perspective, about time, and contrast to the German

Davinia: what are the musical tropes for such scenes (repetitive, up/downward motifs, etc). A means of differentiating this from Lodoiska etc – in Elisa, similar tropes, but anxious.
Some of the named places are real (the hospice, the Pont du diable), some (Colline des Morts) apparently fictional – or at least not mentioned in contemporary Alpine writings.

ii We first read about the opera in Cherubini’s letter of 10 June 1783 to M. Miramone, secretary general of the Feydeau. He is in Le Havre, and has settled definitively on L’Ospice St Bernard with librettist St Cyr. By October 1783, L’Hospital St Bernard is ‘almost finished, just five pieces left’, and the Feydeau committee invited to issue the resolution for the staging. But there are delays, and in summer 1794 Cherubini insisted on getting the censor’s approval before finishing work on it. Giovanni Carli Ballola, Luigi Cherubini: L’uomo. La musica (Milan: Bompiani, 2015), 138–9.

í Quotes from the newspapers drawn from David Charlton, ‘Cherubini: A Critical Anthology, 1788–1801’, RMA Research Chronicle….. The Degotti brothers Ignazio and Ilario were responsible for the stage designs, in partnership with machinist Boulet (who had been poached form the Opéra in 1791). For Mark Ledbury, their strength was creating strongly characterised and complex worlds (rather than simply astonishing pyrotechnics or perspectival spectacle) – often the overwhelming forces of nature over man. In ‘Musical Mutualism: David, Degotti and Operatic Painting’, in Art, Theatre and Opera in Paris, ed. Sarah Hibberd and Richard Wrigley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 53–76, at 59.


vi According to astronomer Lefrançois Lalande, it was difficult to come to agreement on measurement of altitudes of Swiss mountains, see Marcil, ‘Découvrir’, 160. Traditionally, the perils and terrors of the glaciers and high peaks had been set against the beauty of the gentle valleys. But Louis Ramond de Carbonnière’s 1789 Observations distinguished between the level of understanding available to those – tourists – who contemplated the mountains from the valleys, and those – explorers – who scaled them and gained philosophical, aesthetic and moral insights. Louis Ramond de Carbonnière’s Observations faites dans les Pyrénées, pour servir de suite à des observations sur les Alpes (Paris, 1789) – originally part of his French translation and critique of William Coxe’s Travels in Switzerland (1779) and a response to his description of the glaciers around Chamonix-Mont Blanc.

vii Marc-Théodore Bourrit’s Itinéraire de Genève, Lausanne et Chamouni (Geneva, 1791). Bourrit had written previous popular works, including Voyage pitoresque aux glaciers de Savoye fait en 1772, and Lettre sur le Premier voyage…

vii The taste for mountains encompassed multiple discourses with different significations. Using Bourrit’s texts as a source, journalists focused on different elements and perceptions of the landscape, often catering for the reader imagined as a potential (as well as arm-chair) traveller. It was in the Journal encyclopédiqque that the aesthetic construction of the high mountain as a place of beauty is most sensitive, from 1791 onwards. See Marcil, ‘Découvrir’, esp. 170. And Florindo seems to have some parallels with Bourrit, describing what he saw not as a scientist, but as an artist; see Fend, 25.

ix [This para indebted to Duffy]

x Cian Duffy and Peter Howell, eds, Cultures of the Sublime: Selected Readings, 1750–1830 (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011): intro: (3) dominance of the Kantian analytic in scholarly accounts of 18C British discussions of the sublime first seriously challenged by Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla in their anthology The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). (4) In 1701, in his Letter from Italy, Joseph Addison had registered the impossibility of a disinterested response to a landscape which had long possessed a range of specific historical and cultural associations, and this impossibility is repeatedly recognised in contemporary engagements with the natural sublime. Distinction between landscape and geography.
Robert Stone (http://punzel.org/Ephemeris2013/Stone.pdf) Rousseau states the need for civic virtue explicitly in his Discourse on Political Economy. There he writes that “Virtue is merely this conformity of the private to the general will.” A state without civic virtue is doomed, it will collapse under the weight of corruption and greed, or else it will be kept functional only by the terror of a tyrant. Love of country provides the only antidote, and it is potent indeed, “joining together the force of self-love and all the beauty of virtue....” In his Discourse on Political Economy Rousseau states explicitly that citizens must be educated in virtue so that they are able to perceive what the General Will Is.

I submit that the reverse is also true. I would posit that Rousseau formulates the General Will in such a way as to inspire civic virtue in its pursuit.
The individual would identify himself with the general will of the whole community, achieving moral liberty through spontaneous political activity. Republican virtue was a sensation (not just a consequence of knowledge) Montesquieu.

The National Convention was revolutionary France’s third attempt at a national legislature. It was formed in September 1792, following the August 10th journée, the invasion of the Tuileries and the suspension of the monarchy. The National Convention was elected with a broader franchise than the Legislative Assembly, the distinctions between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ citizens having been abolished. The three years under the National Convention were eventful, divisive and violent. They were plagued by war and civil war, increasing radicalism in Paris, factional struggles between the Girondins and Montagnards and the continued failure of economic policies and conditions. In June 1793 the Montagnards, backed by the radicals of Paris and the sans culottes, forced the expulsion of the Girondist deputies and gained control of the Convention. By late 1793 the National Convention had delegated much of its control over policy to committees, most notably the Committee of Public Safety. He viewed his fellow Montagnards as ‘pure, reasonable, and sublime patriots’. Geoffrey Dart, Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 191

Rulers who followed Rousseau’s philosophy were able to demonstrate a vibrant but deceptive humanitarianism. They expressed love for humanity while at the same time crushing those who disagreed with the general will. For example, during the French Revolution, individuals like Robespierre were given enormous power to express the general will. Of course, dictators like Robespierre turned the general will into an expression of their own wills. According to Rousseau, then, sovereignty should reside with the people, in the form of the general will, which ought to be the source of the law’s legitimacy. The general will is not a mere aggregation of the wills of selfish individuals (which Rousseau called “the will of all”). Rather, the general will is formed when citizens ask themselves what is in the common interest rather than what is good for them specifically as individuals. However, Rousseau believed that such public-spiritedness is wholly unnatural, since we are naturally selfish creatures. It must therefore be cultivated artificially, by means of a set of institutions and practices whose purpose is to promote ‘sentiments of sociability’.

While Rousseau appropriated the general will from the theological debates of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, he made the concept his own with the political formulation he gave it in his Du contrat social (1762; On the social contract).


Eelco Runia, Moved by the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 114–5

Vertigo is implied in Burke’s apprehension of the sublime: if we look up at a mountain the sight is awesome and pleasurable, but if we are looking down from a height, the pleasure is etched with horror. As explored by Hitchcock in Vertigo, for whom the sublime is always spatial; see John Orr, Hitchcock and 20th Century Cinema (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 51. Though the impression of distance in the perceiving eye not the distance itself that is crucial. And in Kant’s mathematical sublime, our inability to measure space results in a feeling of vertigo. Eelco Runia, ‘Into Cleanness Leaping: The Vertiginous Urge to Commit History’, History and Theory, 49/1 (2010), 1–20. Roger Caillois (Man, Play and Games, trans Meyer Barash (NY: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961)


Camille Desmoulins saw the Terror as Revolution frozen

As distinct from Duffy’s ‘discourse of depth’, exemplified in accounts of visits to Vesuvius and Etna, and debates about geological ‘deep time’, which generated tropes that shaped descriptions of the human mind and models of consciousness.

Theatre under the Terror was required to propagate civic virtues and provide positive models of behaviours. The Théâtre Feydeau was a former royalist stronghold (which continued to attract
individuals of ‘questionable’ patronage), and so particularly had to demonstrate its support for the new regime, though audiences seem to have developed a heightened political awareness, and greeted its dramas with disagreement and debate.