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Author(s): Rob Wilson

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *boundary 2*, Vol. 19, No. 1, New Americanists 2: National Identities and Postnational Narratives (Spring, 1992), pp. 205-229

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/303456>

Accessed: 03/04/2012 11:51

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Techno-euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime

Rob Wilson

War itself, if it is carried on with order and with a sacred respect for the rights of citizens, has something sublime in it, and makes the disposition of the people who carry it on thus only the more sublime, the more numerous are the dangers to which they are exposed and in respect of which they behave with courage.

—Immanuel Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime"

The nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end.

—Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?"

The emergence of American literature in the first half of the nineteenth century centered around the evocation of a certain kind of representative landscape that, widely circulated as a foundational scene of American appropriation in the paintings of Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church and in the poems of William Cullen Bryant and Walt Whitman, not to mention *Moby-Dick*, for example, had identified and accommodated the emergence

of the United States as a geopolitical power of international status. Such representations of the American Sublime that surged into literary dominance during these expansionist decades of manifest destiny (1835–1855) summoned up vast scenes and icons of a national might that had to be tapped into, challenged, and overcome. These landscapes and spectacles of expanding power helped to solidify and to circulate, within the American political imaginary, discourses of national exaltation that allowed this labor of collective appropriation to be hazed over with the light and imminence of divine sanction: “The function of the landscape” served, in the well-known cultural analysis of Leo Marx, “as a master image embodying American hopes.”¹

These hopes for American geopolitical power—displaced unto a manifest landscape that functioned, by such an imaginal consensus, “to ground manifest destiny in the immanence of nature”²—were largely liberal, pragmatic, progressive ones, in which even machine technology immediately and increasingly came to be integrated into the scenery “as the fulcrum of national power.”³ “Fear haunts the building railroad,” Emerson admitted in his journal in September 1843, “but it will be American power and beauty, when it is done.”⁴ While fronting this technological emblem of continental expansion and taking a Kantian speculator’s delight in the “fifteen or sixteen hours” workday that the Irish railroad workers of Concord were subjected to, Emerson concluded that the railroad was a disciplinary apparatus of pikes and shovels that “is a better police than the sheriff and his deputies to let off the peccant humors” of alienation.⁵ Emerson’s famous “American Scholar” address of 1837 was not alone in trumpeting a cultural break with the terms and tropes of Great Britain and Europe: “Why cannot our literati comprehend the matchless sublimity of our position amongst the nations of

1. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 159.

2. Howard Horwitz, “Sublime Possession, American Landscape,” in *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 55. Horwitz argues that Washington Allston’s *Lectures on Art*, begun in 1833, and Thomas Cole’s *Course of Empire* paintings of 1833–1836 provided “an alternative, evacuative account of sublimity and subjectivity” to the more dominant discourse of manifest destiny, which posited “a nature already possessed, hailing conquest without struggle, transcendence without anxiety or liminality” (37).

3. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 155.

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), 221.

5. Emerson, *Selections*, 221.

the world?" urged John Louis O'Sullivan upon the nationalistic community of Young Americans in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*; authors, painters, orators, and historians soon arose to answer this felt need for a cultural sublimity commensurate with the geopolitical power of a fast-industrializing nation.⁶ It was during these formative decades of literary nationalism, in fact, that the United States developed, through such sublime self-representations of their own national and global mission, in such works as "Song of Myself," "Self-Reliance," and *Moby-Dick*, into a world leader of spectacle production.

What Leo Marx analyzed as the "rhetoric of the technological sublime" had emerged to displace pastoral images of a receding agricultural community. This rhetoric at once evoked a combination of awe and terror at the power and progress of industrialization and, by means of the idealizing haze of aesthetic ratification, neutralized the dissonance and dissent of political opposition into a massive sublimation: Workers, slaves, and Indians alike were wiped away from such scenes of technological redemption. Any alienation or appropriation laborers suffered, as in Emerson's transcendentalist perspective, built character and ratified progress. This sense of euphoria before the technological sublime, infecting the rhetoric of protectionist Daniel Webster and free marketer Whitman alike, served a hegemonic function: So constructed, icons of the sublime worked to reduce the threat of capitalism to social formations of mass industrialization and to reduce the latter to the terror and wonder aroused by an ever expanding technology seen merely "as the product of inventive [American] genius, and the source of labor-saving machines."⁷

6. On the emergent literary nationalism of "Young America," see Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Worlds and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), 109–15, and Benjamin T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1957), 102–218. O'Sullivan notoriously coined the phrase *manifest destiny* in 1845 as he urged the annexation of Texas and the settlement of Oregon, though the hegemonic self-representation of America's millennial role in history and corporeal autonomy in space was no novelty: see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 125–29, and Wai-Chee Dimock, "Nation, Self, Personification," in *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 9–14, on Melville's complicity in the discourse of continental appropriation.

7. Carolyn Porter, "Emerson's America," in *Seeing & Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 79. Porter is refiguring Leo Marx's account of "the rhetoric of the technological sublime" in terms of a liberal hegemony over labor and the future.

This discourse of the American sublime materialized national power into credible forms and shared terms that, in effect, conscripted citizens into a dynamic of possessive individualism that insured the industrial incorporation of the country. As a trope of romantic community, the sublime worked for "kindred spirits" within the American political imaginary, not merely as a sentiment to be feigned but as a force to be acted upon, believed in, and enjoyed. Even the skeptical Henry Adams stood in awe of technology with the American inventor Samuel P. Langley as they began "to feel the forty-foot dynamo[s] as a moral force" at the Paris World's Fair on the threshold of the twentieth century: "Before the end," Adams concluded, "one began to pray to it [the sublime dynamo]; inherited instinct taught the national expression of man before silent and infinite force."⁸ As a language of democratic longing, the sublime imposed landscapes or technoscapes of national identification and higher force, by means of which puny individuals might identify not so much with the power of the state as with a sublimated spectacle of national empowerment increasingly materialized into a railway train, an electronic dynamo, an airplane, or a bomb. What Adams called this American instinct of credulity before "silent and infinite force" had been long inculcated.

Ratifying aesthetic and technological uses of natural force as equally compelling, however, the ideology of the American Sublime trapped American liberals, such as Whitman and Church, into a contradictory discourse legitimating the expansion of national power. Although in Whitman's New York state, for example, and especially in the Lower Hudson Valley, the doctrine of sublime scenery remained an underlying ideal called upon to justify environmental preservation and was used in the battle to prevent Storm King Mountain from being turned into a Con Edison hydroelectric plant as late as 1980, the equally compelling claim to tap into, command, and develop this natural power was no less rooted in emerging dynamics of the technological sublime.⁹ Founded upon a flight from history that sublimated nature and the democratic subject into resources of continental redemption, spectacles of the sublime, such as Church's *Niagara* (1857) and Whitman's "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (1867), disseminated elected spaces of light and

8. Henry Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin," in *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1918), 379–81.

9. See Raymond J. O'Brien, *American Sublime: Landscape and Scenery of the Lower Hudson Valley* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) for an account of competing aesthetic and technological claims upon the Hudson River, the place that established landscape as the quintessential American genre.

horizons of dematerialized power that valorized American labor and called out for further projects of aesthetic, political, and technological redemption. From the Puritans through the romantics, then, we can now recognize that the American Sublime had evolved into a cultural genre quite capable of sacralizing force, inspiring communal belief, and modulating history to national ends.¹⁰

Breaking with by now residual discourses linking nature and nation to that powerful complex of ideology Thomas Jefferson called "Nature's Nation," I will claim that this American Sublime will have to be refigured, within a postmodern economy, to imagine forth and represent America as an entity of transnational cyberspace that "knows no national boundaries, feels no geographic constraints."¹¹ This will increasingly happen, at the super-structural level of cultural production, as transnational corporations emerge, amalgamate, transform, flow, and exchange signs and profits across tired nation-state boundaries and grow oblivious to cultural or ideological distinctions that once inspired allegiance. Passing out of nation-state modernity and Fordist modes of massive industrial accumulation, the United States is fast entering a more fluid world of transnational incorporation. To explain this, Jacques Attali uses a model of totalizing postmodernization that criticizes as opposed as Fredric Jameson and Walter Benn Michaels might well agree with;¹² he argues, "The world is becoming an ideologically homo-

10. This historical claim is exemplified in Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). The more strictly literary-aesthetic and isolationist claim that the American Sublime is founded upon an Emersonian "refusal of history, particularly literary history" is argued in Harold Bloom, "Emerson and Whitman: The American Sublime," in *Poetry & Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 254. Bloom has even more solipsistically urged that the American Sublime "is the visual equivalent of what might be called *the American religion*" in which "the American consciousness finds freedom only in solitude, the self-definition only in the Sublime conviction that what is best and oldest in the self is no part of the created world": see Harold Bloom, "The American Sublime: Gregory Botts, the Painting as Icon," *Arts Magazine* 64 (Summer 1990): 37–38. Bloom's increasingly *gnostic* sense of the American Sublime has led him to conclude of George Bush's international politics that "our foreign policy basically amounts to making the world safe for gnosticism": see the interview "The Art of Criticism, I" *Paris Review* 118 (Spring 1991): 227.

11. See Robert B. Reich, "The End of the National Champion," in *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 124.

12. Fredric Jameson, "Immanence and Nominalism in Postmodern Theoretical Discourse," in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). Jameson provides a homological account of the American

geneous market where life is being organized around common consumer desires, whether or not those desires can be fulfilled."¹³ We already inhabit a world system of such unstable reconfiguration that the mighty United States may now be "Japan's granary, like Poland was for Flanders in the seventeenth century."¹⁴ Dependent upon a long-encoded agonistics of power and a dangerously solipsistic sense of natural and technological superiority, this nationalist ideology of the American Sublime will die hard and not without fighting: Indeed, the ongoing abolishment of the United States as an economic superpower, once contingent upon rivalry with the U.S.S.R. for global hegemony and upon proliferating nuclear weapons for the maintenance of sublime terror, may already be a fait accompli within "a world unlocked from its Cold War polarization."¹⁵

This giddy postmodernization of the nation-state bodes ill for romantic self-conceptions of identity. Like some unimagined poetry of the North American techno-future, William Gibson's cyberpunk science fiction is not alone in mapping the emerging space of this new, postnational, and post-natural immensity: His cybernetic version of the technological sublime registers an intoxicating sense of cybernetic infinitude, as clusters and constellations of data proliferate and collage in the nonspace of the mind. These internal realms of informational immensity and eugenic alteration attract high-tech criminals—"console cowboys" and techno-punks of various classes, and the God-hungry searching for the ultimate Matrix or Code—to appropriate the transnational sublime of this new technoscape. *Cyberspace* is the term Gibson first uses in *Neuromancer* (1984) to imagine forth

market as theorized in the antiliberal representations of Walter Benn Michaels "as an asphyxiating total system" determining the desiring subject of postmodernism with an "all-encompassing fatality" (212). Horwitz's term for this New Historicist integration of economic and cultural discourse is "isomorphic" (*By the Law of Nature*, 19).

13. Jacques Attali, "The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development," *Vital Speeches* 57 (1 May 1991): 422.

14. Attali's disparaging comment is quoted in William Pfaff, "Redefining World Power," *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1991): 38.

15. This post-Cold War claim concerning "the abolishment of [American] superpower status itself, which proves to have been the product of superpower rivalry," is developed in William Pfaff, "Redefining World Power," *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1991): 33–43. This is countered, in the same issue, by the more globally interventionist argument that the United States remains a unipolar superpower threatened from within by a waning national consensus, and from without by "Weapon States," like Iraq and North Korea, which can use nuclear and biological weapons to "shrink distance" and "multiply power": see Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1991): 23–33.

this multidimensional matrix of high information, consciousness alteration, and post-Fordist Sense/Net control over a thoroughly introjected medium: "Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity."¹⁶ This is how a corporate voice-over too comfortingly describes this Cyberspace Matrix as sponsored by the Mitsubishi Bank of America. Such Cyberspace bespeaks, as Gibson urges, "the spiral arms of military systems, forever out of reach."¹⁷

Flip-flopping at stellar speeds of data-light between financial centers of Tokyo, London, and New York, Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) continues to map this neo-transcendental matrix of postmodern space and technological glut with a mingled sense of delight (what I am calling *techno-euphoria*) and paranoia ("universal techno-angst" is what Gibson calls this mood, shared with Katsuhiko Otomo, in "Rocket Radio"¹⁸): Gibson represents, through compulsive approaches to power of leapfrogging characters, a cybernetic version of this neo-sublime—as space flips over into unmapped, unlocated immensities of multinational capitalism that recognize no national spaces, abolish regional identities, forge transnational communities of telecommunication, and create *awe* (newly found information matrices like God) and *dread* (paranoid conspiracies programmed by some unimaginable nexus of power/Capital with unforeseen complexities and threats of self-sublation). Literary critics might well associate such visions of sublime release with an all but futureless future, a transnational para-

16. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Science Fiction, 1984), 51. Related to Gibson's experiments with cyberspace, an even more American-utopic version of "virtual-reality technology" is emerging in multinational America as a ludic enclave of self-transcendence hailing rock fans and computer buffs. I am thinking, for example, of rock guitarist Jerry Garcia's vision of a Grateful Dead concert occurring in cyberspace, 1991: "Wouldn't it be great if we could participate in a concert that doesn't happen in one particular geographical place, and in which we could all contribute something to the mix? The performers and the audience could all put on their 3-D headsets and their body-suits, and wherever they were they could plug in through the telephone network and meet in this computer-created world, this artificial place that is some kind of sum of all their perceptions. The music and the dancing could all be mixed together, and we could participate in this celebration in pure cybernetic space": see the Grateful Dead as interviewed by Howard Rheingold, *Interview* 21 (July 1991): 73.

17. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 52.

18. William Gibson, "Rocket Radio," *Rolling Stone*, 15 June 1989, 84–86.

noia and a technophilic disenchantment, as well as the immanence of a degraded bio-future that seems as much a threat to the ancient American landscape as any nuclear annihilation.¹⁹

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Cyberpunk or Language Poetry notwithstanding, residual versions of euphoric nationalism do linger on in American discourse, at least at the level of cultural and political production. What I will want to argue, finally, in a reading of George Bush's Patriot missile speech, is that the "bombs bursting in air" of the recent war in the Persian Gulf gave proof through the postmodern night, to Americans and the First World, that America was still there as an entity/identity of sublime power. But consider, first, a recent ad campaign circulated by the Philip Morris Companies as a post-Fordist instance of such nationalist nostalgia and spectacular sublimity. Superimposed over a color reproduction of Albert Bierstadt's landscape of American wilderness, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (1868), in which a herd of deer and waterfowl, in lieu of displaced Miwok-Paiute Indians, traverse the light- and God-drenched vastness, waterfalls, lakes, and granite of the High Sierras, the Philip Morris Companies blazon the following claims about such representations "equating [American] grandness with largeness"²⁰:

A CENTURY AGO THE PAINTINGS OF ALBERT BIERSTADT
DREW CROWDS. ALL HAD IMAGINED THE AMERICAN FRON-

19. Sublime cyberspace remains the terrain in William Gibson, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988). Alan Liu has connected the cybernetic sense of "transcendence" feigned in Gibson's science fiction to the romantic imagination as "source code," as well as to a claustrophobic sense of multinational capitalism simulating and frustrating *sublime release* ("[postmodern] transcendence is a goto routine of the imagination that goes nowhere") in "Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail," *Representations* 32 (1990): 75–77. The "technological dystopias" imagined forth in American cyberpunk fiction and cinema are related to the more technophilic origins of American science fiction in Andrew Ross, "Getting Out of the Gernsback Continuum," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 411–33, and "The Ecology of Images," paper presented at the International Film Festival, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, 30 Nov. 1990. Also see Pam Rosenthal, "Jacked In: Fordism, Cyberpunk, Marxism," *Socialist Review* 21 (1991): 79–103, on the post-Fordist dynamics of cybernetic subjectivity and socialization.

20. Barbara Novak, "Grand Opera and the Still Small Voice," in *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 29.

TIER, BUT NOT QUITE LIKE THIS. HERE WERE THE VISIONS THAT WOULD LURE THEM WEST, AND WHICH REMAIN DEEP IN THE AMERICAN PSYCHE TO THIS DAY. BEYOND THEIR PURE DRAMA AND COLOSSAL SCALE, THEY ARE ALSO AMONG THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED LANDSCAPES EVER PAINTED. PHILIP MORRIS SALUTES BOTH THE SPIRIT AND THE VIRTUOSITY OF A MAJOR AMERICAN ARTIST.

Underwriting this re-monumentalization of a Euro-competitive sublime, Philip Morris announces corporate sponsorship of a nationwide tour entitled "Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise, A Retrospective," correctly urging the integration of the aesthetic and the economic within these visions of American cultural capital. As Lee A. Iacocca has proclaimed of such national landscapes, during Chrysler Corporation's sponsoring of a similar Metropolitan Museum exhibition in 1987 entitled "American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School," such paintings "go far beyond celebrating the beauty of the American landscape in the 1800s; they are a celebration of America itself."²¹ In a world of receding nationalism, furthermore, the motto Advantage, Chrysler may hinge upon recuperating faith in a new motto: Advantage, American Sublime.

Through the three-phase dynamic of sublime possession imported and transformed from northern romanticism, an American emptiness could be imagined as national ground, anxiety could be overcome as subjective trauma, and an identification with some vast landscape could function to sacralize energy for collective appropriation: Fitz Hugh Ludlow wrote of Bierstadt's first encounter with the Yosemite Valley in 1863, as the Civil War raged, "We did not so much seem to be seeing from that crag of vision a new scene on the old familiar globe as a new heaven and a new earth into which the creative spirit had just been breathed."²² Bierstadt's metaphor of American vastness represses such forces of U.S. history as conquistadors, gold diggers, Union soldiers, laborers, and California railroad barons, not to mention the native American tribes who had lived along the Merced, Fresno, and San Joaquin rivers and who had been forcibly removed from aesthetic contemplation by such tactics as the burning of acorn caches to starve the Ahwahneeches out of Yosemite Valley (as recently as 1851).²³ This repres-

21. Lee A. Iacocca, "Preface," in *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, ed. John K. Howat (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1987), x.

22. Fitz Hugh Ludlow, "Seven Weeks in the Great Yo-Semite," *The Atlantic Monthly* 13 (June 1864): 746.

23. See David Robertson, "First Artists in Yosemite," in *West of Eden: A History of the Art*

sive metaphor has been resurrected from simulacra of postmodern history to disseminate nation-building themes of enterprise, empowerment, and economic appropriation. Such sublime representations were never innocent of imperial ambitions, then or now. As Howard Horwitz describes the dynamic of sublime possession enacted in such paintings as Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1863), which was displayed on a "Great Picture" tour of the northeast along with the painter's collection of Indian artifacts,²⁴ "In Bierstadt's canvas, the question of rightful proprietorship of western lands, a violent political controversy at the time, is suspended, or rather settled" in favor of the liberal consensus.²⁵

Mark Twain trenchantly disagreed with Bierstadt's *Domes of the Yosemite* (1867) when such paintings of the West were being consumed across the country: "It is more the atmosphere of Kingdom-Come than of California."²⁶ Completed in Rome in 1869, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* was never even set in the Sierra Nevada: The foreground deer and ducks appear ten years earlier in *Gosnold at Cuttyhawk*, the massive cliff reconfigures Yosemite's El Capitan from several earlier paintings, and the distant snow peak echoes Mount Lander in *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, and Mount Rosalie from *Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie*.²⁷ Bierstadt's painting remains a private composite of the American Sublime, rearranged to serve a vision of national grandeur remarkably reasserting itself during the Civil War trauma as consensus threatened to disintegrate into faction. Such versions of the American Sublime aim less at scenic fidelity than at symbolic typology, churning materials of western U.S. geography into millennial scripture and the violence of history into the un-

and Literature of Yosemite (California: Yosemite Natural History Association and Wilderness Press, 1984), 1–19.

24. American Adam that he was, Bierstadt named this canvas, which made him Church's sublime rival in national art, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* after Colonel Frederick W. Lander, who headed the U.S. government survey expedition that first brought the painter to the West. Similarly, he named another landscape painting *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains—Mount Rosalie* after Rosalie Ludlow, whom he married in 1866. See Gerald L. Carr's commentaries on these paintings in *American Paradise*, 284–93.

25. Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature*, 31–32.

26. See Nancy K. Anderson, "'Wondrously Full of Invention': The Western Landscapes of Albert Bierstadt," in *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1990), 91. Twain's comment from August 4, 1867, along with other contemporary responses are discussed in Gordon Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* (New York: Abrams, 1974), and David Robertson, *West of Eden*, 22–23.

27. Anderson, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, 93.

examined euphoria of national myth: *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* envisions the recuperation of a preindustrial Eden, displaying the power of manifest destiny to compel the landscape into enterprise, as well as to ratify the pragmatic spirituality of Adamic capitalists who went on opening the continent to Euramerican designs.²⁸

This nationalist ad-poem remains duplicitous, I would add, as befits its postmodern corporation, which, having already become another transnational web transforming Philip Morris U.S.A. into Philip Morris International, will “often cloak [itself] in whatever national garb is most convenient.”²⁹ Circulating tropes of power’s sanctification within the American political imaginary, the painting is doing the work of cultural memory, recapitulating a version of literary-aesthetic nationalism that was dying out as Bierstadt painted. America was once a country of abundance and energy: The huge frontier and abundant natural resources stimulated a mobile capitalism in which, in David Potter’s analysis of economic abundance as a motivating lure in the 1950s, “the spectacle of vast riches waiting to be grasped [had] inspired men to devise new means for grasping them.”³⁰ Repressing tobacco as it globally diversifies, Philip Morris knows what it is doing with Bierstadt: this company commands the nation’s largest advertising budget (it spent \$2.07 billion in 1989) and depends on such companies as the Leo Burnett advertising agency of Chicago, which “knows how to touch the heartland of America,” to rephrase the American imaginary and summon up a neo-national image worthy of, for example, the Marlboro Man, the Pillsbury Doughboy, the Jolly Green Giant, and the feminist vow of Virginia Slims, “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby!”³¹ Reeking of postmodern nostalgia, this painting would again resonate as a spectacle of Late Capitalist enterprise

28. Though Bierstadt received \$25,000 in 1865 for *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak*, the highest price ever paid for an American painting at that time, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* sold at auction in 1892 for a mere \$8,000, one-third to one-half of what it would have brought three decades earlier (Kevin J. Avery, “A Historiography of the Hudson River School,” in *American Paradise*, 9). That these landscapes of the American Sublime have recovered their cultural capital is indicated by the fact that Church’s monumental canvas, *The Icebergs* (1861), sold for \$2.5 million in 1979 (Avery, “A Historiography,” 17).

29. Reich, “The Global Web,” in *The Work of Nations*, 115.

30. David M. Potter, “Abundance and the Frontier Hypothesis,” in *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 163.

31. See Mark Landler, “Leo Burnett: The Ad Agency Philip Morris Loves to Call For,” *Business Week* (15 April 1991): 66.

here deployed along shifting international frontiers: Re-sublimated via Bierstadt and Philip Morris into a "visionary compact" of art/enterprise, the land speaks a comforting brand of literary and economic nationalism.³²

Such discourses of imaginal vastness presuppose tropes of the American Sublime that, as Philip Morris urges, "remain deep in the American psyche to this day" and would legitimate on some politically preconscious level, as I have suggested, the nineteenth-century project of frontier settlement and technological redemption. Can these "visions that would lure them west" inspire postmodern consensus in American enterprise and lead (as the ad claims) from the symbolic level of cultural symbol ("Art") to economic and technological levels of national action ("Enterprise")? Re-connecting the political to the symbolic, like a semiotic ghost from Frederick Jackson Turner's subconscious, the assumption is that a renewed identification with America's vastness and narratives of strong selfhood will motivate, as they did in the past, faith in American enterprise and lead—guiltlessly, shamelessly—to the sublimation of nature into new projects of national/global domination. No matter that this inalienable wilderness comprises part of the Yosemite concession deal that Universal Studios sold to Matsushita in 1990, provoking another Japan-bashing episode of defensive nationalism, as if this chunk of wilderness vastness somehow was not for sale like everything else under the postmodern sun to the highest, fastest multinational bidder! The frontier still works as an enchanted landscape of genteel self-redemption in Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1991), but even the Leo Burnett Company must wonder: What can bind America together anymore if the frontier has vanished and there no longer exists any such entity as a national economy with an expanding GNP to perpetuate a collective misreading of national power based on nineteenth-century vestiges of unified objects and home-based corporations?

Although the nation-state may appear to be over as hegemonic threat, icons of national sublimity are still being summoned to recycle cultural capital and to renew international profits: Recall that Philip Morris recently paid \$600,000 to the National Archives for the privilege of adver-

32. On discursive protocols and the expansionist politics of the American Sublime, see Donald Pease, "Sublime Politics," in *The American Sublime*, ed. Mary Arensberg (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 46–47, and Donald Pease, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 223–34, on the dynamics of sublime possession as a visionary compact—that is, "as a cultural reserve, a store of unrealized cultural motives, purposes, and political processes we honor but [seemingly] do not act upon" (48) and that stand in need of renewal.

tising the Bill of Rights in another spectacular project to associate cigarette smoking with certain inalienable American rights like life, liberty, and the pursuit of narcosis. With Asian markets now "Speaking Lark" and still riding "Marlboro Country" to the American Dream, Philip Morris International has managed to keep cigarette consumption rising 4 percent each year, exactly the same rate that U.S. consumption keeps dropping.³³ In an economy of waning nationalism, Morris can, by turns, invoke a symbolic legacy of grand memories and common acts to reclaim what Ernest Renan called the will to perpetuate "the social capital upon which one bases the national idea"³⁴ or simply bypass such nationalist appeals altogether. Can multinational corporations "make *Made In America* mean something again?" the chairman of Omni Consumer Products asks citizens of a decaying Detroit in *Robocop 2*, as he offers mind-boggling displays of cyborg policemen and a euphoric drug called NUKE.

Bierstadt's homage to the natural sublime must be getting a bad conscience, especially in a Late Capitalist era of ecological deformation and technophilic euphoria. My claim is that this discourse of imaginal vastness resurrected from the past, more than race, religion, geography, military necessity, or ethnic allegiance, may be one of the instruments that hold the *e pluribus unum* heterogeneity of America together. Given that postmodern nation-states are being reconstituted into sites of discursive heteroglossia and disseminated into multicultural histories of plural contention, as well as into post-Fordist cyberscapes of placeless identification, we need to scrutinize the return of what Homi K. Bhabha names "the performativity of language in the narratives of the nation,"³⁵ which recalls the power of vernacular language and print-capital to forge an "imagined political com-

33. Philip Morris has actually expanded its North Carolina cigarette production by \$400 million to meet this increasing foreign demand, notwithstanding the rise of "foreign activism": see Laura Bird, "Even Overseas, Tobacco Has Nowhere to Hide," *Adweek's Marketing Week* (1 April 1991): 4-5. Describing the two-hundredth anniversary "Bill of Rights Tour" sponsored by Philip Morris Companies Inc., a red, white, and blue brochure situates this arcane document from Virginia within a high-tech environment of simulated history: "A 5,000-square-foot pavilion has been specially designed to house the exhibit. The architecture of the pavilion is a balanced mix between aerospace-inspired high technology structural systems and traditional gallery-like display space. Upon entering, you will be greeted by a collection of video images and graphic displays providing historical background on the Bill of Rights."

34. Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" trans. Martin Thom, in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

35. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 3.

munity” of cultural conviction as portrayed in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. To overemphasize, however, that the nation-state is neither biological nor transhistorical but an overdetermined discursive construction can be misleading. Such a textualization of history into discourse must not overlook “the [ideological] role of a remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation *qua* discursive-entity-effect to achieve its ontological [psychological] consistency.”³⁶ The sublime object, so situated and historicized, answers some imaginary need for national power and motivates the desire, in an American context, for democratic sublimation of subject into nation.

Within a post-Fordist economy, the corporate trope of natural/national identification remains an uncanny image, encoded with nostalgia and irony.³⁷ In 1991, a Honda is more likely to be made in America than a Ford or Pontiac, as cars become *signs* of global brands rather than *works* of national origin. How can spectacles of natural/technological sublimity (powers) or discourses of republican principle (rights) resonate in zones of Multinational Capital? Given postmodern reconfiguration, symbolic engineers—advertising executives, politicians, poets, cultural theorists—must wonder: How can images of a national sublime remotivate a consensus of American political superiority and exceptionality amid economic globalization, mass communication, and cybernetic alteration? I will return to this nineteenth-century discourse of the natural sublime as linked, at some deep level of the American psyche reconnecting the political to the symbolic and vice versa, to the ideology of national enterprise and frontier domination, but I want to shift the focus from Californian mountains to Massachusetts

36. On the “fantasy-organization of desire” within the political imaginary of the nation-state sublime, see Slavoj Žižek, “Eastern Europe’s Republics of Gilead,” *New Left Review* 183 (1990): 53–56, and Slavoj Žižek, “Formal Democracy and Its Discontents,” in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 162–69.

37. Global displacements of national space and cybernetic modes of capital accumulation are discussed in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989): “Arenas of conflict between the nation state and transnational capital have, however, opened up, undermining the easy accommodation between big capital and big government so typical of the Fordist era” (170). Also see David Harvey, “Flexibility: Threat or Opportunity?” in *Socialist Review* 21 (1991): 65–77, a special issue devoted to post-Fordism: “Geographical mobility, for example, permits capitalists to seek out deregulated spaces [outside nation-state boundaries] with more flexible labor markets, allowing them to achieve greater flexibility in production processes” and profit (73).

missiles to scrutinize a contemporary image of the American Sublime that would, in a more postmodern register of cyberspace, re-instantiate American power as a superior force of technological power and global redemption.

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Working within the everyday discourse of national self-representation, I want to read George Bush's Patriot missile speech, which he gave at the Raytheon Corporation in Andover, Massachusetts, on February 15, 1991, as an uncanny enactment of cultural symbols of power activating a residual language of the American political unconscious. Beyond their material efficacy as "smart weapons" that had emerged as "one of the unexpected heroes of the war,"³⁸ the Patriot missiles were constructed (misrecognized) as iconic embodiments of the American Sublime. High technology, not nature, was used to instigate the will to global superiority at a moment when transnational reconfiguration and domestic stagnation had left many citizens wondering not only where nature had gone as a ground of value but also what was so superior about American technology or even the American economy itself. The Patriot missiles helped Americans locate one of the ultimate grounds of their own patriotism: belief in the technological sublime as an agent of historical redemption.³⁹ Beyond their material efficacy, the president used high-tech weapons to re-instantiate and materialize national power—the American Sublime—in a context of post-Fordist globalization and financial insecurity, as well as to regenerate the waning belief system and de-industrializing economy of workers in Massachusetts.

38. As the *Washington Post* described the scene, "The president appeared to be bouyed by the rousing reception given him at the Raytheon plant, where Scudbuster sweatshirts and American flags dominated the scene. Touting the 17-foot missile that has become one of the unexpected heroes of the war, Bush declared, '42 Scuds engaged, 41 intercepted.' The tougher Bush's rhetoric, the louder the roar from workers who chanted 'U-S-A! U-S-A!' when the president took the stage" (*Washington Post*, 16 Feb. 1991, sec. A, p. 12). The *New York Times* observed that Bush "made his remarks flanked by two black, red and white Patriot missiles," while outside the plant, "200 war protesters carried signs reading, 'Negotiate, Don't Obliterate'" (*New York Times*, 16 Feb. 1991, sec. A, p. 6).

39. As David F. Noble has concluded of American social attitudes toward labor and post-war industrial technologies: "Confronted with the unexpected and unaccepted unravelling of their short-lived empire, Americans are now clinging to their epic myths of national identity and destiny, hoping for yet another revival. And central to these myths is a collective fantasy of technological transcendence." See his *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Knopf, 1984), xi.

To inspire national conviction, Patriot missiles were situated within a long-standing discourse of national empowerment and the moral sacralization of American power that contradicts, if at all examined, the transnational economy of the postmodern nation-state in which these weapons/icons were designed and constructed. The Patriot missile was enlisted to perform, beyond doing battle against Iraq's clumsy, Russian-designed ballistic Scuds, an ideological labor within the discourse of national empowerment and international trade wars. The Patriot missiles, on one level of fetishization, personify American patriotism to American workers, disoriented and de-centered in the postmodern, transnational scene: "Patriot works because of patriots like you," Bush affirms in this region of Lexington-Concord resistance and the New England work ethos.⁴⁰ Beyond this democratic identification of national object and national labor and symbolic identification of fathers and fatherland, Bush urges the technological superiority of America as instantiated and materialized in the very sublime of these high-tech weapons: "You see," he explains, "what has taken place here is a triumph of American technology. It's a triumph taking place every day, not just here at Raytheon but in factories and firms all across America, wherever American workers are pushing forward the bound of progress, keeping this country strong, firing the engines of economic growth."⁴¹

After invoking a frontier of high-tech sublimity in which ordinary Americans at Raytheon "will put unparalleled American technology to use as a tool for change," Bush situates such labor, agonistically, as part of an ongoing global battle against so much more than Iraq and the Third World weapon states: "What happens here is critical, absolutely critical, to our competitiveness now and then into the next century."⁴² As Bush remarked to the American Association for the Advancement of Science earlier on the same day, democratically including technicians and workers in the same ideological misrecognition, "Today the spirit of innovation is alive and well in America."⁴³ Or, as he asserted to the Economic Club of New York on February 6, three weeks into the war, "America is a 'can do' nation. And

40. George Bush, "Remarks to Raytheon Missile Systems Plant Employees in Andover, Massachusetts, February 15, 1991," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 27, no. 7 (18 Feb. 1991): 177.

41. Bush, "Remarks to Raytheon," 177-78.

42. Bush, "Remarks to Raytheon," 178.

43. George Bush, "Remarks to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, February 15, 1991," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 27, no. 7 (18 Feb. 1991): 174.

America is home to the largest, most productive economy on earth.”⁴⁴ This sense of technological superiority, ratifying a deeper cultural and moral conviction of political exceptionality at work, underwrites the grander claim of American hegemony that was ultimately propagated through this war in the Persian Gulf that “civilized behavior can begin again.”⁴⁵ “We can build a better world and a better new world order,”⁴⁶ Bush affirmed, with the full conviction of a postmodern American Adam turning the Old World desert into a democratic garden watched over by those machines of loving grace, the Patriot missiles. (It was amid the populist euphoria of the Patriot missile speech that Bush first urged the Iraqi people to “take matters into their own hands and topple Hussein,”⁴⁷ leading later to the Kurdish refugee disaster.)

By-products of Cold War terror and cybernetic ingenuity, the Patriot missiles were semiotically enlisted, by President Bush, as connotative agents in the first post-Cold War holy war, in which, with allied support, a New World Order of Pax American sublimity slouched toward Bethlehem to be born. Given the de-centered international web of postmodern production, in which nation-state corporations can barely be located, never mind named as sites of political allegiance, this was a desperate act of national consolidation and corporate identification with an American product, place of production, and brand name. Strictly speaking, in a postmodern economy of instantaneous sign-flow and modular bricolage, there can no longer be any such thing as an “American forklift,” nor, for that matter, can there be even an “American Pontiac” or “American Ford” that is *made in America* and that represents, as some fetishized object of national identity, the technological ingenuity, economic might, and cultural superiority of its patriotic makers. Such nationalism works not so much as an economic reality as a social instrument: While marketing research shows that such nationalist cues appeal primarily to consumers over forty-five because they, or their fathers, served in World War II, the Big Three marketers in Detroit, as in Lee Iacocca’s rather tiresome “Buy America” pitch, still perpetuate a bunker mentality of competitive nationalism.⁴⁸

44. George Bush, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Meeting of the Economic Club in New York City, February 6, 1991,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 27, no. 6 (6 Feb. 1991): 139.

45. Bush, “Economic Club,” 139.

46. Bush, “Economic Club,” 139.

47. *Washington Post*, 16 Feb. 1991, 1.

48. Reich cites the American forklift example as a multinational product in “The Global Web,” in *The Work of Nations*, 115n.: As U.S. Commerce Department officials discov-

By ideological projection, then, the Patriot commodity gave a name and a place to and embodied a materialized focus for national patriotism at an end point in the American century when, as Robert Reich claims, "American capitalism was now [*sic*] organized relentlessly around profits, not patriotism."⁴⁹ Still, romantic nationalism remains a discursive formation subject to public representation and recall. Nations build their communities upon acts of strong forgetting and historical error, as Renan urged, as well as upon sites of everyday enjoyment and empowerment that can still inspire communal conviction.⁵⁰ Upon closer examination of this techno-euphoric symbol of American national identity, we might pause to wonder: What's so *American* about the Patriot missile? These smart weapons, as *Business Week* soon pointed out, have foreign brains.⁵¹ Later, James Fallows (known for his Japan-bashing) gleefully observed, lest Americans get complacent in their semiotic battle for global superiority, that "in its coverage of the U.S. victory in the Persian Gulf the Japanese press was much more skeptical about American high-tech mastery than were most American reporters" and that, except for the F-117 Stealth bomber, American "technology was more impressive to the Iraqis than to the Japanese."⁵² Indeed, as a point of Japanese pride, semiconductor chips inside the Patriot missile were said to be housed in ceramic packaging made almost exclusively by the Kyocera Company of Kyoto, and even Raytheon's air-to-air Spar-

ered, "strictly speaking, there was no such thing as a U.S. forklift, or a foreign forklift for that matter." On this "marketplace where appeals to nationalism carry much less weight with consumers," see David Kiley, "The End of the 'American' Car," *Adweek's Marketing Week* (4 Mar. 1991): 18–20.

49. Robert B. Reich, "The Coming Irrelevance of Corporate Nationality," in *The Work of Nations*, 140.

50. Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, 11. Also see Žižek, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead": "A nation exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in certain social practices, and transmitted in national myths that structure these practices" (53).

51. See Paul Magnusson, "American Smart Weapons, Foreign Brains," *Business Week* (4 Mar. 1991): 18. Magnusson argues that, despite Vice-President Dan Quayle's boast that laser-guided bombs provide "solid evidence of America's preeminence in technology," the Sparrow air-to-air missile, for example, has "circuits from Japan, a critical memory chip [that] was made in Thailand, and other essential parts [that] bore the West German stamp." The Commerce Department estimates that about 20 percent of American weapons' parts are manufactured abroad, raising the specter of "foreign dependency."

52. James Fallows, "Is Japan the Enemy?" *New York Review of Books* 38 (30 May 1991): 36.

row (now displacing the Patriot as an anti-missile missile in Israel) depends upon high-tech components that must be imported from Japan. Paradoxically, a posture of national autonomy (in Japanese, *Kokusanka*) concerning defense-weapons production has emerged in both countries, despite the postmodernity of the international market that makes such economic defensiveness, as Reich and others have observed, regressively symbolic, if not impossible.⁵³

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As ground or cause, there is no longer any such corporate America that abides and functions, politically or economically, as an entity of economic nationalism. The romantic trope of “corporate nationality,” in which champion corporations like GM, National Biscuit, United States Rubber, and US Steel once incarnated the wealth and well-being of the nation in the 1950s, is being deconstructed and de-centered into an international matrix of sign-flow and cash-flow that recognizes no national boundaries nor cultural allegiances beyond increasing profits of mega-capital and the mandates of technological innovation. At the cultural level of racial, ethnic, and regional heteroglossia, moreover, America is being palpably deconstructed into competing traditions and alternative narratives and canons as the controversy over the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* indicates. Nor, for that matter, as I would argue, can there be any such material entity called the American Sublime—unless politically reconstructed with a full, historical understanding of its dangers and damages. As the boundaries and centers of national identity are dissolving into zones of cyberspace and transnational webs of financial interaction, corporate commodities, like Niagara Falls, MGM, Waikiki, or the Empire State Building are being sold away to transnational constructions and cybernetic networks that have no point of origin nor measure of political identity.

Still, as the six-week-long war of American techno-euphoria in the Persian Gulf showed, the Patriot missile was constructed (by President

53. Japan, following American Pentagon policy, has taken a defensively nationalist position of “technological autonomy” concerning the manufacture of key defense weapons: see Michael J. Green, *Kokusanka: FSX and Japan’s Search for Autonomous Defense Production* (Cambridge: MIT Japan Program, 1991). Since high-tech weapons are designed and fabricated all over the globe, and any firm can be considered American if it is incorporated in the United States, not even “the Pentagon has [any] idea who is making what and where” (see Reich, *The Work of Nations*, 116).

Bush) and misrecognized (by factory workers at Raytheon and the American silent majority) as the by-product of *American* technological superiority manifesting, for all the Old World to see, the faith of the American people in the sacralization of superior force to moral ends. With smart weapons bursting in air over Jerusalem as a sign that the American flag of the brave and free is internationally there, the Patriot missile emerges as a latter-day icon of the American Sublime that embodies and images forth the will to national greatness of the American economy and spiritual grandeur of the hardworking Massachusetts people whose state economy may be failing but whose national sense of mission and God-given errand in the wilderness can still find postmodern ratification in the oil deserts of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Raytheon may make Amana microwaves and Speed Queen washers and dryers, but Raytheon's seventeen-foot Patriot missile had captured the national imagination by evoking and reifying this power of the American Sublime. Yes, Raytheon may be the largest user of ozone-depleting chemicals in Massachusetts, and it may have been fined \$1 million in March of 1990 for illegally using classified Pentagon budgets and documents to achieve their edge, but Raytheon's Patriot missile, as reimagined by President Bush, helped Americans forget history and remember their own sublimity as displaced into a cybernetic bomb.⁵⁴ The Patriot missile helped fuse and socialize ordinary citizens into spectators beholding, in awe and terror, that postmodern hero of the technological sublime—the “cyborg soldier”⁵⁵ and his/her weaponry of defense.

Though no poet, Bush euphorically acted the part of the Emersonian poet, reawakening “the power of national emblems,” like Niagara Falls, Old Glory, and the Transcontinental Railway, to inspire belief and to tap into the “great public power” of American energy awaiting contemporary use as railways, canals, fisheries, or poems.⁵⁶ The American people fancy they hate poetry, but “they are all poets and mystics,” Emerson affirmed in “The Poet,” citing the power of a flag to motivate a pragmatic array of national enterprises: “Some stars, lilies, leopards, a crescent, a lion, an eagle, or

54. See Diane Dumanoski, “Raytheon Curb on Ozone Threat Brings Praise,” *Boston Globe*, 25 Nov. 1990, 59, and John M. Broder, “Raytheon Fined \$1 Million in Documents Case,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Mar. 1990, sec. A, p. 12. Raytheon was one of five major weapons suppliers to admit possessing stolen military documents.

55. See Chris Hables Gray's detailed description, “The Cyborg Soldier: The US Military and the Postmodern Warrior,” in *Cyborg Worlds: The Military Information Society*, ed. Les Levidow and Kevin Robins (London: Free Association Books, 1989), 43–71.

56. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *Selections*, 233.

other figure which came into credit God knows how, shall make the blood tingle under the rudest or the most conventional exterior."⁵⁷ Though no poststructuralist, Bush, like the advertising poets of Leo Burnett and Philip Morris, is reconnecting the symbolic to the political.

Constructed out of the sublime poetics of President Bush and his uncanny ghostwriters, the Patriot missile emerges as the latest icon of American techno-euphoria simulating, if not instantiating, the superiority of American technology and corporate ingenuity of Americans at least to themselves. According to Kant's reading of the sublime, the aesthetical judgment must decide for the general over the statesman: General Schwarzkopf is more sublime than President Bush for the dangers he confronts, the violence he enacts and opposes, and the might of nature he engages and masters as dynamical force.⁵⁸ Leave it to nay-saying carpers of detail on "60 Minutes" or in *Business Week* to reveal, weeks later, that the Patriot missiles the General commanded were composed of computer components and chip technologies that had been made in Japan, proving the American dependency on Japanese know-how and on the flow of the mighty yen. The American empire may have ended on September 16, 1985, when the United States became a debtor nation and "the money power shifted from New York to Tokyo,"⁵⁹ but no one was telling the general, the president, or CNN, who together had produced another spectacle of high technology and patriotic imagery that allowed America to remain the unchallenged world leader of spectacle production. (The inability of a Patriot missile to intercept an Iraqi missile that slammed into a military barracks in Saudi Arabia, killing twenty-eight people, was later blamed on a computer failure in the radar system Raytheon had built.)

The technological sublimity of the Patriot missile as an icon of American invulnerability has been challenged from another quarter. In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on April 16, 1991, Theodore Postol, a defense analyst at MIT revealed (through examinations of *Ma'ariv*, the Israeli newspaper) that the Scud-busting record of the Patriot was far from sublime: The Patriot's homing device was confused by pieces that

57. Emerson, *Selections*, 228–29.

58. Immanuel Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime," in *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Pub. Co. 1966), 102.

59. This is the impious claim of Gore Vidal, "The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas," in *At Home: Essays, 1982–1988* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 104–7, who argues for the post-Cold War dismantling of what he calls "the National Security State" and the Armageddon mentality still propagated under the Reagan administration.

broke away from incoming Scuds, successful hits sprayed lethal Scud fragments over a larger area than would have been affected by the incoming Scud, and since the Patriots often followed their targets to the ground, they added their own debris and damage to that of the Scud. Though Bush read the Patriot record with all the confidence of a football score—"Patriot is 41 for 42—42 Scuds engaged, 41 intercepted"⁶⁰—Postol later revealed a more dismal tally: Before Patriot was enlisted into the battle, 13 Scuds fell unopposed near Tel Aviv, killed no one, but wounded 115 people and damaged 2,698 apartments; after the Patriots were used, 11 Scud attacks killed one person, injured 168, and damaged 7,778 apartments. (Raytheon soon challenged this assessment, claiming in a FAX news release that Postol's testimony was based on "unsubstantiated" data.)⁶¹ In "Patriot Failures" (editorial, May 26), the *New York Times* called on the Pentagon to explain and defend the actual, as opposed to the cultural, performance of the Patriot missile as a high-tech weapon.

The function of ideological construction is to create a misrecognition a people can believe in and enact into historical fulfillment: to create a sublime object of ideology. The Patriot missile functioned, beyond its military performance, as a symptom of American desire to install the sublime of its own geopolitical project in global redemption. There is nothing intrinsically sublime in a sublime object, which gets enlisted from everyday objects to embody, temporarily, "the impossible-real object of desire."⁶² Simulating

60. Bush, "Remarks to Raytheon," 178.

61. See Eliot Marshall, "Patriot's Scud Busting Record Is Challenged," *Science* 252 (3 May 1991): 252–53.

62. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 194, for an analysis of the way national ideology interpellates and encodes the political subject through producing "a sublime object" (which, for him, is anything from Stalin [see p. 145] to the Titanic [see pp. 69–71] to a Hitchcock movie [see p. 182]), which here represents *lack*, or the failure, of desire's representation: "According to Lacan, a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire." The American Sublime can be distinguished from this more negative Kantian/Hegelian dynamic by its adherence to a nineteenth-century political imaginary that does not so much refuse as reify subjective enjoyment into hugely positive spectacles of national empowerment, as I have claimed. American identification with producing the frontier sublime as a space of national redemption voided of threats can be contrasted, as cultural ideology, with the Canadian Sublime, which Margaret Atwood has portrayed as a collective conviction of "cold empty space" that threatens self/community with hostility, mutilation, failure, exile, death, and "the ever-present feeling of menace": see Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A The-*

national grandeur, the Patriot missile had become the sublime object of American political desire. The National Security Council of the United States had recognized since 1987 that chip technologies being produced in Japan posed “a direct threat to the technological superiority deemed essential to U.S. defense systems.”⁶³ The Patriot missile confirmed a shared sense at Raytheon, if not an ideological consensus around the country via CNN, of this “technological superiority” the United States had depended upon to enlist belief and action in the American Sublime during a time of global war.

In the economy of war, national power must be substantiated via a process of outinjuring the opponent, but this material violence gets abstracted and distanced, sublimated, or, in effect, *redescribed*: “The act of injuring, or the tissue that is to be injured, or the weapon that is to accomplish the injury is renamed. The gantry for American missiles is named the ‘cherry picker,’ just as American missions entailing the massive dropping of incendiary bombs over North Vietnam were called ‘Sherwood Forest’ and ‘Pink Rose,’”⁶⁴ as if war evoked a natural process of blossoming and recreating, say, a “Desert Storm” (sublime nature) or a “Desert Shield” (sublime technology). What Kant called the sublime of war would, in effect, reaffirm the legitimacy and reality of competing cultural constructs: To the victors go the power of world-building and world-destroying. Bodies maimed, injured, and destroyed help to substantiate the military—and moral—superiority of the winning ideology. The individual body of the patriot is enlisted, thereby, into the cause of national substantiation. In Elaine Scarry’s uncanny description of war as a formal structure of injury and contest, “When the system of national self-belief is without any compelling source of substantiation other than the material fact of, and intensity of feeling in, the bodies of the believers (patriots) themselves, then war feelings are occasioned. That is, *it is when a country has become to its population a fiction that was begin*, however intensely beloved by its people that fiction is.”⁶⁵ Through staging technological spectacles of sublime power in a by now global cyberspace, war had again served to substantiate waning convictions of national superiority, as patriots were reinscribed to believe in, injure, and die

matic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), 30–35, 132, and chap. 2, “Nature the Monster.”

63. Reich, *The Work of Nations*, 156n.

64. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 66.

65. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 131; Scarry’s emphasis.

for techno-euphoric master-narratives of freedom, redemption, sovereignty, and sublimity.

Although as a national rallying cry "America, the Beautiful" portrays panoramas of sublime mountains and sweeping prairies that tap into a long-standing sanctification of the wilderness sublime, this lyric is unlikely to replace "The Star-Spangled Banner" as the national anthem of the United States of America any day soon. The war in the Persian Gulf will probably permanently derail Indiana congressman Andrew Jacobs's 1990 bill to bring about this national anthem shift in the American political imaginary of its innermost purpose, goals, and tools.⁶⁶ Whitney Houston's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Superbowl XXV brought home the oddly poetic, transporting, and profoundly ideological appeal of this song to millions of viewers preoccupied, as they were, with the war in Iraq, which began, as President Bush had promised, shortly after the January 15, 1991, deadline. Since Francis Scott Key had first penned this Anacreontic drinking lyric after the British assault on Baltimore in 1814, the "bombs bursting in air" have ratified, celebrated, and consecrated the American project of technological transcendence in ways no political speech can.⁶⁷ The war in the Persian Gulf, whatever else it accomplished, gave proof through the long night of postmodernism, that America "was still there."

I think this is so because, beyond legitimating a stance of war-mongering as self-defense, Key's poem circulates images of national enjoyment and social empowerment that presuppose a kind of self-absorbing, spiritualized techno-euphoria: The weapons manifest an American will to maintain international superiority and national distinction. These bombs of reified American intelligence—early "smart weapons" of American origin and end—substantiate the internal dynamics of the American Sublime. If the flag remains an emblem of threatened unity, the bombs better embody a shared conviction of national might and moral legitimacy: They resonate, as do the Patriot missiles, with the terror and wonder of global redemption. These oft-repeated images serve better than body counts or political

66. On this "Star-Spangled Banner" controversy, see Margaret Carlson, "Oh, Say, Can You Sing It?" *Time* (12 Feb. 1990): 27. In a pre-Persian Gulf War CNN poll in January 1990, which presumably would now be higher, 67 percent of Americans preferred that "The Star-Spangled Banner" remain the national anthem.

67. See Robert Ferguson, "'What is Enlightenment?' Some American Answers," *American Literary History* 1 (1990): 245–72, on material and ideological origins of Key's patriotic ballad, written following the British bombardment of Baltimore's Fort McHenry in 1814. Key's poem was designated the national anthem by an Act of Congress, March 3, 1931.

polemics to substantiate the American construction of itself and its material and spiritual by-products as a blessing to the earth. We are more than prepared to fight a holy war of moral absolutes and sacralized violence—this, as Saddam Hussein failed to realize in his own euphoric counter-rhetoric of Islamic *jihad*, is the only kind of war Americans know. The Patriot weapons helped President Bush convince Americans, within a context of waning national faith and economic dismantlement, that America was still there as a country capable of a national sublime, if only what Kant called the sublime of war. It was Kant, you may recall, who associated the sublime of the North American landscape with a certain kind of primitive mentality and native wildness that could be differentiated from thicker cultures of the European Enlightenment, reckoning in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* that “among all savages there is no nation that displays so sublime a mental character as those of North America.”⁶⁸

68. See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goodthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 111. My critical assumption has been that, in analyzing these documents of discursive nationalism from domains of literary and everyday culture, as Ariel Dorfman suggests, “there may be no better way for a country to know itself than to examine the myths and popular symbols that it exports to its economic and military dominions”: see *The Empire’s Old Clothes* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 8. As Terry Eagleton has urged upon literary critics as citizens: “The role of the contemporary critic is to resist that dominance [of market ideology within the mass-mediated public sphere] by re-connecting the symbolic to the political, engaging through both discourse and practice with the process by which repressed needs, interests and desires assume the cultural forms which would weld them into a collective political force”: see *The Function of Criticism: From ‘the Spectator’ to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1987), 123.