**Enigmatic Pearl: Trauma and the Sublime in the short film, Pilbara Pearl**

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**Abstract**

My article explores the Burkian notion of the sublime in the postmodern sense, linking big ideas such as romantic love, as it is felt, which is grand in scope and transcendentally threatening in origin, rendering it and its representation almost incomprehensible to humans, such as Eddie (the protagonist). In doing so, I seek to answer one of Lyotard’s questions, regarding whether art is possible under the category of the sublime by applying some of his tenets to my film. I draw upon my creative practices to explore how I sought to represent trauma and sublime notions of love through the aesthetics of cinema. Kant, too, is discussed, in terms of the immensity of love and Eddie’s initial failure of imagination to comprehend objects which appear terrifyingly boundless and formless, such as Pearl’s immersion in the otherworld of her fish tank. Through Wicks we encounter Schopenhauer, providing an access point to the trauma theories of Caruth and Walker, to reveal the traumatic authorial origins of this filmic narrative. Finally, in agreement with postmodern concepts, I argue that the gap between being human, and the thing (antagonist Pearl’s immersion in her fish tank, which we, the audience, witness) is a sublime moment in the film for Eddie. Consequently, his powers of reason and imagination challenge him into a reversal, ultimately enabling him to surrender to love to experience the unthinkable, as he immerses with Pearl in her fish tank. I thus conclude that Eddie’s terror of love transforms into a positive epiphany, which is, nonetheless, sublime.

**Keywords:** trauma, sublime, short film, fantasy, magic realism, memory.

In 1756 Edmund Burke defined the sublime as: “whatever excites ideas of pain or danger in the mind. It produces the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling. When pain and danger press too close, they are simply terrible and therefore incapable of giving delight. However, at certain distances it may be observed that such things are delightful”. 1. This article uses the tenets of four theorists of the sublime as viewfinders to examine the short film I wrote entitled *Pilbara Pearl*. 2.
What could be more potentially painful or delightful as love, or the fear that one’s beloved might be endangering her life by immersing her head in a fish tank world which only she believes in?

**Pilbara Pearl Clip 1: Pearl enters the ‘other world’ of her fish tank.**

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At first the protagonist, Eddie, can only articulate his fear as a fear of outside threat to the antagonist, Pearl, “Some bastard could just come along and . . .” 3. That fear, along with his fear of rejection, causes Eddie’s delight in Pearl to evaporate, and he leaves. Eddie’s nearness to a love that is grander in scope than anything he appears to have encountered is tormented by its transcendentally threatening origin, the other world of Pearl’s fish tank, rendering its representation incomprehensible to him, unimaginable.
But, from where we, the audience, sit, we’re privy to Pearl’s underwater explorations, and thus can be amused while we hope and fear that Eddie will turn his truck around and ultimately understand her uniqueness.

Such is the stuff of cinematic romance.

PILBARA PEARL CLIP 2: Eddie’s fear and Pearl’s fear revealed.

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The postmodernists amongst us may feel that those Burkian notions of the sublime display a certain degree of naïveté, for Burke is primarily concerned with how the sublime is felt rather than thought. Film specializes in visual imagery, and we screenwriters, by and large, work hard to convey emotion without lumbering it with too much expositionary thought or dialogue. It could be thus argued that my viewfinder, when first imagining this film, was Burkian.

However, skipping forward to the Twentieth Century, Lyotard might have considered the abyss separating Eddie’s imagination (or lack of) and his reason as sublime. The movement in sublime feeling, “from pain to pleasure” 4 is particularly evocative of critical thought for Lyotard when he analyses sublime feeling as: “double defiance.
Imagination at the limits of what it can present does violence to itself in order to present that it can no longer present.” 5. Postmodernity states Lyotard, “cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” 6. Isn’t this precisely what happens to Eddie when he suspends his disbelief by sticking his head in the fish tank to look for Pearl?

For me, the sublime presupposes an encounter with something beyond the subject’s imagination.

Eddie’s pain transforms into the astonished pleasure we see on his face when he immerses boots and all in the tank with Pearl. Perhaps then, my subliminal viewfinder could be perceived as postmodern. However, it would be equally valid in the postmodern arena to talk about the sublimity of the film without any discussion of my authorial intentionality whatsoever.

If, as Lyotard purports, postmodern sublime puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself . . . allowing us to share a nostalgia for the unattainable?, then I must agree, for that is exactly what I sought to do in my film, whether my intentionality is relevant or not. Lyotard states: “A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of philosopher: the text he [or she] writes, the work he [or she] produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for” 8.

So let the art look; you’ve looked at the art; my work here in done . . . unless we more closely examine the ‘look’ of the film, which showcases the ochre and aqua of the West Australian Pilbara landscape. Australian artist and theorist, Barbara Bolt, challenges the metaphor of light as enlightenment, reconceiving this ‘revealing’ light as the blinding glare of the Australian sun in her book, Art Beyond Representation, in which it is revealed that too much light may in fact reveal nothing . . . unless we go back in time again, to the eighteen hundreds, to see whether this film could also be viewed through a Kantian lens. Like Burke, Kant begins his treatment of the sublime by comparing it with the beautiful, and like Burke, he sees these as binary opposites. Pilbara Pearl is constructed of binary opposites, featuring a female Indigenous character and a Caucasian male character; one’s pragmatic and one’s a dreamer; one wants to leave, one wants to stay; the red ochre desert meets the cool aqua ocean . . . where the promise of love meets the obstacle of sublime incomprehension. Written in the late 1990’s, when many white Australians were seeking ways to reconcile with Indigenous Australians, I’m reminded of Burke’s thoughts On the Sublime and Beautiful: “If black and white blend, soften, and unite / A thousand ways, are there no black and white?” 10.

For Kant the sublime has a subjective aesthetic quality, which settles somewhere between the faculties of imagination and reason, drawing moral judgments into his understanding of reason. Amid his aesthetical explorations, Kant has identified two distinct modes of sublime which can be applied to this film: the mathematical and dynamical 11. Eddie’s failure to comprehend the boundlessness and formlessness of Pearl’s fish tank world would make it appear to be a sort of mathematical sublime. However, Eddie is standing before, even slapping, the side of a little fish tank, not witnessing an atomic explosion or the immensity of the ocean or Grand Canyon.

Can Kant’s mathematical sublime still apply? Certainly.
Being challenged by Pearl to *imagine* a formless world, immensely different to the bound little interior of her fish tank, which Eddie has paid homage to with his pagoda gift, causes Eddie to enter the tumultuous mental emotional state, a state Kant would describe as sublime. And is there not also a moment of dynamical sublime when Eddie comes back and sticks his head in the fish tank yelling for Pearl? This is the annihilation of the sensible self as Eddie’s imagination tries and fails to comprehend the depth of Pearl’s uniqueness amid the might of his love for her.

Although I have been viewing *Pilbara Pearl* through three key theorists’ lenses, seeing the sublime in a film is not like putting on 3D glasses to make the genre stand out, for the sublime is not a genre but a fluid movement spanning centuries and generic boundaries.

To better understand the impulses which inform this undertaking, writing, whether or not it reveals something sublime or traumatic, one might turn to Schopenhauer to peer through his lens. Wicks points out that for the German Philosopher, Schopenhauer, who was much influenced by Kant in the late 19th Century:

> Compassionately recognizing at a more universal level that the inner nature of another person is of the same substance as oneself, one arrives at a moral outlook. This compassionate way of apprehending another person is not merely understanding abstractly the proposition that “each person is a human being,” or understanding abstractly (as would Kant) that, in principle, the same regulations of rationality operate equally in each of us and oblige us accordingly. It is to feel directly the concrete life of another person in a magical way; it is to enter into the life of humanity imaginatively, such as to coincide with all others as much as one possibly can. It is to imagine equally, and in full force, *what it is like* to be both a cruel tormentor and a tormented victim, and to locate both opposing experiences and characters within a single, universal consciousness that is the consciousness of humanity itself. With the development of moral consciousness, one expands one’s consciousness towards the mixed-up, tension-ridden, bittersweet, tragicomic, multi-aspected and distinctively sublime consciousness of humanity itself.  

While we are focusing through Schopenhauer’s lens, isn’t it impossible to see the sublime and not also see trauma? Must trauma and the sublime go hand in hand? Unlike the sublime, trauma theory in the humanities has a relatively short history, stemming from psychology. The term, ‘trauma theory’ didn’t appear until the late Twentieth Century in Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*.
If what is understood to be traumatic relies on the centrality of terror and catastrophic events, then *Pilbara Pearl* cannot qualify as traumatic. It hardly seems likely that Eddie will suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or disassociate himself from the memory of not believing in Pearl. And it’s impossible to tell, since we leave him not after the event, but still happily ensconced in his epiphany. Eddie’s trauma happens on the way to getting somewhere uplifting rather than catastrophic, yet battle he must. In her article, *Trauma Theory: Contents, Politics, Ethics*, Susannah Radstone questions the boundaries of trauma theory thus: “For whom, when, where and in what circumstances are popular texts read and experienced as trauma texts?”

Trauma theory must follow traumatic events, examining the affects on its subjects and placing the examiner in the position of an all-knowing witness. Is a screenwriter an all-knowing witness? I may offer suggestions, but the text is yours to deconstruct. Pearl does, however, offer us an event without a witness, when she swims in her fish tank alone, yet it is an event which we, the audience, witness with Eddie, who’s initially only privy to the exterior of the tank.

Upon closer examination of Pearl, one may arrive at a semblance of traumatic understanding, however, the cause of the trauma has been purposely withheld from the film’s narrative because I wanted to write a romantic magic realist odyssey, not document the sources of my own internal conflict. One thing, however, is cinematically certain. When the film opens, Pearl is very much alone at the roadhouse. She is displaced from her culture for reasons unstated. And what does she do when she is alone? She dives into a fish tank where she encounters underwater creatures and elements, and, whilst these visions appear to be uplifting rather than nightmarish for her, it is Eddie who points out the danger of Pearl being so vulnerable ‘out there all alone with her head stuck in a flamin’ fish tank’. It is his fear which speaks, and it is Pearl’s fear of not being fully comprehended which responds that he is only offering her ‘half a life’ by asking her to come with him to the Nullarbor. But how does Pearl come to be in this Pilbara roadhouse in the first place? What does it mean to be a lonely girl in a remote roadhouse as far from immersion in the ocean as one can get? The film, *Pilbara Pearl*, sprang from my poem, *Nullarbor Pearl*, written at a time when I journeyed on the long stretches of Australian highway, including the lonely Nullarbor plains. Having grown up on the Gold Coast, I was a coastal dweller, who longed for immersion in the ocean on those dry, dusty stretches. I journeyed to come to terms with trauma in my own life - the divorce of my parents, resulting in one in remaining in Queensland, and the other residing as far away as humanly possible within the same continent, in Western Australia. Here is that poem.

*Nullarbor Pearl*

At closing time she grabs a tea towel
and heads for the wheeze and gurgle
of the aquarium,
leans over it to wipe fingerprints.

The smell of ocean shocks her absent skin
like a reprisal.
She reaches in to touch the seaweed,
webs her fingers with it,
glances at the door,
takes a breath,

and
plunges
all of her face into the tank.

A sea-horse glides down her nose,
sweeps the dust from her smile.
The smallest inmate nibbles
her spinifex eyebrows.
A Truckie slaps the side glass.
She leaps
in a bubble-flurry of fins,
wipes her face with the tea towel
and runs behind the counter
giggling. 15.

How did this Pearl emerge into the Pearl we discover in *Pilbara Pearl*? I ultimately married for twenty years, before my marriage failed. For me, this feeling of displacement was playing itself out in a repetitious fashion in ways Caruth elaborated on via the viewfinder of Freud in *Unclaimed Experience*: Caruth states: “the repetition at the heart of catastrophe – the experience that Freud will call ‘traumatic neurosis’ – emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one simply cannot leave behind. [. . .] the literary resonances of Freud’s example goes beyond this dramatic illustration of repetition compulsion and exceeds, perhaps, the limits of Freud’s conceptual or conscious theory of trauma” 16.
In my world there had been much trauma and displacement, which I always found difficult to articulate, except through fictitious narratives. Show me a functional family. Perhaps many of us who feel traumatized by our own personal emotional disasters seek positive ways to prevent us suckling endlessly on our own sadness. In *Trauma Cinema*, Janet Walker states: “In the first case, fantasy refers […] to the nonverdical construction that is nevertheless ‘propped on’ a real event. To be sure, the real event is ‘fortuitous’, meaning that is not the origin of the fantasy but rather the grain of sand around which the pearl of fantasy is deposited” 17. Walker further elaborates, in agreement with Katherine Hodgkin and Sussanah Radstone, that: “Emphasis on the traumatic event as origin is misleading; what is absent from the teleological narrative, in effect, is precisely the way the mind makes its own meanings” 18. I agree with Walker, who posits that fantasy and reality are inextricably – if mysteriously – bonded” 19.

Consequently, I can reveal that *Pilbara Pearl* is, in fact, a text which sprang from the trauma of displacement followed by a failing marriage, as my antidote to trauma has always been to write a utopian salve in order to heal. How could I thus not agree with Walker when she reveals how the mind’s imaginative elaborations of reality can project one’s internal conflict onto the external world? For me this projection brings my writing squarely into the realm of narrative therapy, without the room here to do justice to narrative therapy theories.

Walker critiques Haaken’s theories of the trauma paradigm in that it neglects the extent to which the mind is an active agent in the defensive transformation of events 20. Consider this scenario posited by Walker:

Imagine memory ranged along a continuum, with extremely verdical memories on the right, false memories on the left, and fantasies propped on reality but not perfectly reflective of it in the center. People would surely be more comfortable if memories on the right were easily distinguishable from memories on the left and could be seen as completely separate, or if it were clear which memories belonged to the right and which to the left. But this is not the case 21.

As an author I can clearly distinguish, and furthermore transform, those grains of sand which most trouble me into pearls, whilst emphatically agreeing that memories, false memories, and fantasies are inextricably linked.

In this short space of time, we have been on a sublime filmic journey, in which we have been positioned to identify with both characters, even though they are fictional constructs, in order to ultimately reveal how their author delved into her own traumas to conceive them as a personal salve, and, at the same time, to offer an uplifting narrative for audience enjoyment. And just beneath our surface enjoyment of the narrative isn’t our fascination with Eddie’s fear and Pearl’s fear like our fascination with many non fictional subjects which are currently the focus of trauma theory? Radstone states: “This model of a de-centred subject caught up in processes of symbolization, desire and fear that lies partly beyond the reach of consciousness has been central to
the development, negotiation and mediation of culture” 22. She adds: “In new trauma theory, it is the event rather than the subject, which emerges as unpredictable and ungovernable” 23.

I wish to end where I began, by focusing solely on what is revealed on screen. Falling in love is not primarily considered as the source of unspeakable suffering (although I’m sure we’ve all had our moments). The trauma Eddie experiences in Pilbara Pearl is the terror of surrendering to the unthinkable, before he immerses fully into suspending his disbelief in all Pearl says she is, all she says she sees, and all he can share if he has the courage to embrace it all and love her. From the moment he enters the fish tank with Pearl we see transformation on Eddie’s face, conveying his wonder and elevation, as his terror of love transcends from trauma into a positive epiphany, which is nonetheless sublime.

PILBARA PEARL CLIP 3: Love triumphs over Fear: Such is the stuff of Cinematic Romance.

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Notes

2 Rossetti, Sarah. scriptwriter, Pilbara Pearl Christopher Watson, director, CVA Film and Television, 1998.