

Sublime Absence: An Analysis of the California Drought Discourse

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Introduction

Imagine living in a world without almonds; maybe that is not too bad. This is the same world in which a mediocre beef burger costs 20 dollars. It is the middle of winter and everywhere you turn you see different shades of brown and yellow. How will you describe the concept of a water park to your kids? In what ways will their childhoods be lacking the very things that made yours memorable? The state of California is in the midst of its worst drought on record. Many lakes and reservoirs are revealing more of their beds than they have since their conception. California is a hub of innovation and industry and its population of nearly 40 million people and large agricultural industry means a huge demand for natural resources. Water is scarce, but it does not seem like the California Government is taking the action necessary to inspire a value shift from an emphasis on consumption to conservation. This affects more than just Californians. The economy of California accounts for a substantial percentage of the United States' GDP and yet change always begins at the smallest scale. By taking a shorter shower, for instance, you are making a change. Before understanding the steps that must be taken to counter the detrimental drought conditions, one must understand the symptoms in need of curing. The sublime is the key to achieving this cure. This might be a different kind of Sublime than most people are familiar with. The use of the sublime response to elicit ideological transformation has proved to be effective since the discourse of John Muir and the subsequent birth of Mainstream Environmentalism. This essay will discuss a new interpretation of the sublime—sublime absence—which depends on the weight carried by rhetorical imagery. It tells us that there are certain characteristics that help define something as naturally beautiful; when we observe those characteristics being taken away, we have feelings of cognitive dissonance, or having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially in regard to behavioral decisions and

attitude change. I will provide the context with the foundation laid by previous thinkers, elaborate on my own concept, and establish current context for the drought situation. Next, I will discuss visual elements which contribute to the sublime absence response and discuss the social media reaction to the government page and its implications.

Sublime Origins

A discussion of the sublime response can be traced back as far as the work of the ancient Greek rhetorician, Longinus. His understanding of the concept focused on the use of language and its ability to take the reader “out of himself.” In *On the Sublime*, he asserts: “that which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no” (Longinus, 1995, p. 23). John Muir is closely associated with the concept of the sublime, especially within the context of environmentalism, but his work was not achieved without the foundation laid by the likes of Longinus. In a Longinian sense, John Muir’s success as an environmentalist can be attributed to a mystical sublime quality seen in his mastery of language. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the sublime as “affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.” This definition of the sublime response resembles Muir’s interpretation because it lacks an emphasis on the negative aspect of the sublime. Muir’s sublime response consisted of “an immediate apprehension of the sublime object, a sense of overwhelming insignificance akin to awe, and ultimately a kind of spiritual exaltation” (Oravec, 1981, p. 247). Muir had the ability to craft his words to create a world of the unknown that was irresistible to his readers. The escalation from apprehension to spiritual exaltation leaves a

feeling of ease about the sublime object. This essay will discuss what might be the impact of sanitizing the natural world for the benefit of anyone who chooses to play the part of a mountaineer.

This palatable version of the Sublime is not how it has always been portrayed in modern philosophy. According to Burke, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” This fear, he adds, “freezes the capacity to reason and act and evokes the overpowering feeling of terror” (Burke, 1757, p.57). The work of Kant overlaps with that of Burke and extends upon it, though not necessarily as a response to it. Kant agreed that fear was the central aspect of the dynamical sublime which, as described by Berleant, differed from his mathematical sublime because it “concerns the fear we feel in response to the enormous might of nature, although we must nonetheless feel secure and unthreatened, able to rise above that fear and not be subject to it” (Berleant, 2009, p. 102). Kant emphasizes that we must not let the terrible of the sublime overwhelm us, which Muir takes even further by softening the negative aspect of the sublime response to create an image of nature that stresses its soft, nurturing qualities rather than its harsh, fear-evoking qualities. Henry Thoreau’s contribution to the understanding of the Sublime was not aimed at encouraging people to explore the land, but rather stressed the uninhabitable nature of “this primeval, untamed, and forever untamable *Nature*, or whatever else men call it” (Thoreau, 1848). Muir saw nature as home, while Thoreau, on the contrary, declared that “this ground is not made for you” (Thoreau, 1848, p.134).

Arnold Berleant takes the Kantian focus on the negative aspect of the sublime and applies it to a much more anthropocentric subject—the war on terror. He states that, “like the aesthetic, the sublime is not necessarily a positive determination but a mode of experience. Hence, to call such acts of terrorism the negative sublime is not an oxymoron but the recognition of negativity whose enormity cannot be encompassed in either magnitude or force” (Berleant, 2009, p. 80). This idea of incomprehensibility of the sublime object is crucial in understanding what makes the sublime response such a foundational topic of study. A sufficient investigation and description of such a multi-faceted human feeling is essential to the conceptualization of the most indefinable aspects of nature and human nature that surround us. The origins of the sublime response paved the way for future thinkers to demonstrate how it relates to the modern world of innovation.

New wave sublime

The concept of the sublime has transformed with humankind’s restless desire to transform the natural world; we have been able to experience an artificial sublime sensation by looking down from the 80th floor of a Manhattan skyscraper or by staring up over 700 feet to the top of Hoover Dam. It forces the question: “How was this even possible to create?” The sublime in this case takes on a different meaning than the awesomeness of Half Dome. It might seem nearly impossible to construct a building that sits 2,700 feet high, but what demystifies The Burj Khalifa, is our ability to witness the creation process. Thus, the technological sublime lacks the same kind of spiritual mystery of creation which makes Yosemite Valley special. The technological sublime can have more of a focus on the destruction of the existing world, but rather the construction of a new one. It should be noted that technologically sublime objects can include nuclear weaponry, which has a solitary purpose of destruction. Sometimes the technological sublime destroys the existing world as a result of its very existence. As put by

Davis, “this technological sublime is a triumphalist discourse in which new technologies and technological spaces convey emotional experiences once reserved for nature” (Davis, 2011, p.73). An additional factor that sets the technological sublime apart from the sublime response felt in nature is the aspect of human triumph. It takes on a hegemonic connotation of man’s desire and ability to conquer nature and create a world which showcases our species’ increasing capacity for innovation. Whereas, we do not take personal credit for the beauty observed in nature; we cannot take credit for that which makes nature special and that is what makes it uniquely beautiful.

The toxic sublime, on the contrary, looks at the terrifying beauty that we can see through the contamination of our land. It may be implied that the mere existence of the technological sublime means a sacrifice of natural beauty, but this is not its focus. Peeples defines the toxic sublime as “the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe” (Peeples, 2011, p.375). In order to be considered the sublime response, every specific interpretation should still possess the foundational qualities that constitute the sublime, but there is a shift when moving from the technological to the toxic. With the technological, it might be seen as a certain responsibility you take for the progress made, while with the toxic sublime, the more appropriate word might be liability, for that is what Peeples wants the audience to feel. The natural tendency for humans is to reject and ignore the human impact when a sight is breathtaking for the wrong reasons. An example of this could be a river that is dyed bright orange from the metallic residue of a nearby scrap processing plant. With the technological sublime, there is a sense of pride that we are capable enough as a species to create something that leaves us speechless, but the toxic takes this concept and flips it on its head and creates a sense of guilt.

Sublime Absence

Normally we would recognize something as beautiful because of the unique qualities it possesses that capture our attention, but what happens when those characteristics are suddenly stripped away? I would argue that this results in an even greater appreciation for what once was. Tragically, in the case of a lost loved one, this feeling comes too late. Sublime absence would suggest that we can have the same feelings about the natural world that surrounds us, but with an increased feeling of personal responsibility for its death. Sublime absence is made up of *first, the internal tensions that emerge through identifying and recognizing that which has been taken away from the land; second, an observation of humankind's ability to modify the earth in such a way that inspires a new, unnatural feeling of awe and fear; and finally, an understanding of how this modification redefines the nature of the land for the worse*. Inspired by Kant's dynamical sublime, Berleant concludes "the effectiveness of terrorism lies in its potential threat to safety and in the very insecurity and social instability that result" (Berleant, 2009). The same can be said for the sublime absence which is evoked only by our understanding of what should exist. An absence of water means an absence of social stability and an emergence of widespread panic, similar to the result of a terrorist attack. While the negative sublime has been used as a way of emphasizing the fear which the sublime response is able to evoke based on the physical or psychological characteristics of the object itself, sublime absence derives its effect from the audience's ability to define exactly what gave the landscape its unique beauty and humankind's unnatural ability to extract that very thing from the land.

The question to ask is how this feeling is able to be evoked in the minds of Californians by the California State Government, who I identify as the responsible party for inspiring change.

Although significant change is not often achievable at the individual level, large-scale movements always begin with the enlightenment of one person at a time.

Current State of Drought

Imagine living in a California where the fairways of all the country clubs are golden-yellow and summer days spent on the lake never come. Imagine going to your favorite restaurant and only receiving water after asking for it and buying the cheapest pound cheddar cheese for fifteen dollars. The worsening conditions have implications far beyond the minds of the average citizen. The world of luxury and convenience in which we live will quickly start to vanish before our eyes. Governor Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency on January 14, 2014. It has been over a year since then and conditions have only worsened. On April 1, 2015, Jerry Brown issued an executive order which marks the first ever mandatory statewide water reduction program. After declaring a state of emergency in 2014, Brown released a statement requesting that residents and businesses voluntarily reduce water usage. He stated: “Hopefully, it will rain eventually. But in the meantime, we have to do our part” (CA.gov, 2014). Not surprisingly, Brown’s weak language was not able to inspire change in California residents as a whole. The emergency declaration was followed by the driest year on record and he still did not feel the need to enforce mandatory drought regulation. There is speculation that the current drought may mark the start of a “dry era” for the west. According to Doug Parker, director of the California Institute for Water Resources in Oakland, “The [water distribution] system that we have was designed back in the 1930s through 1950s to meet population and land use needs of the time” (Siegler, 2015, 5). Californians have been living under the illusion that we have and always will have all the water we will need when, in reality, the state’s overambitious population growth is rapidly questioning that notion. Parker continued to note that “there weren’t 38 million people here back

then” with the other problem being that “they designed this system during an unusually wet period in the West” (Siegler, 2015, p.1). This is a terrifying thought. The question to ask are why did it take so long for the state to issue mandatory water cuts and is the response the Brown administration is facing due to a lack of education of the public? The language on the CA.gov site outlining what the water conservation action will entail is still relatively equivocal saying they will invest in new technologies, streamline government response, and increase enforcement. We are now in the fourth year of below-average rainfall. As of December, 2014, a study done by NASA declared that 11 trillion gallons are needed to reverse the drought effects, an estimate made possible through the use of space and airborne measurements. This deficit has only increased. In January of 2014 the Sierra Nevada snowpack was at 14 percent compared to the norm with the two largest CA reservoirs, Lake Shasta and Lake Oroville, each listed at 40 percent capacity, according to the CA.gov site. The most updated information found indicates that they are now a surprising 72 and 63 percent respectively, which is progress, but by no means indicates serious change. Though it is important to remain optimistic, it is equally important to understand the insignificant effect of rainfall that California has experienced from 2014 to 2015. Since rainfall is so uncommon, when it does occur one can feel a false sense of security. The part played by the sublime absence will prove crucial, just as it proved crucial to John Muir in his plight to preserve the beauty of Yosemite Valley. Are Californians scared enough, though?

Howard Kunreuther, a professor of Public Policy at Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania acknowledges the importance of personal responsibility, something that cannot be created by an executive order. In his podcast he asserts: “Social norms are difficult when you can’t see anyone. So the idea of people taking a shower that is only five minutes would be very hard to monitor and control” (Kunreuther, 2015, min. 3). If most Californians were actively

thinking about the severity of the drought while in their shower or while doing the dishes or watering their lawn, Jerry Brown would not have had to shift his discourse from an overly polite request to a mandatory demand. Unless they choose to expose themselves to the information, residents will never know that parts of the Central Valley are literally sinking due to higher than average rates of underground water extraction which, according to a study published in the journal *Nature*, could “potentially affect long-term seismicity rates for fault systems adjacent to the valley.” The California government must understand the medium through which they should continue to disseminate information: social media. Disturbing images are what has been deemed “click-bait” on the internet. We are exposed to thousands of images every day on the internet, but the disturbing images that evoke a sense of dread and awe are those which stick with us.

Kunreuther puts it simply when he points out that “the one big challenge, however, is whether the state’s residents will see it as ‘their duty’ to restrict water usage” (Kunreuther, 2015, min. 5).

The sublime absence response offers the potential for residents to feel that sense of duty, which has to start with a sense of fear for what is to come. Viral internet trends may seem fleeting, but there is no denying their potential for creating awareness. In the case of the Ice Bucket Challenge, \$115 million was raised for a disease that most people had never heard about. Even if everyone has already forgot about the disease, it made a difference by raising a huge sum of money. It can be argued that the money raised for the cause was largely a result of sheep following sheep, so one can only imagine what kind of effect it would have to add genuine personal commitment to this equation. If California is indeed headed into the era of the “mega-drought,” how might we be forced to redefine what it means to be a Californian if we define ourselves by the priorities we hold? If it is the beauty of the land we value, we must expose ourselves to images that show us how much of that beauty we have taken away.

The drought in California has created a divided state. Chuck Bonham, director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, reveals the complex nature of the subject when he urges that everyone come together because the drought has “highlighted the traditional tensions between groups that claim the state’s limited water for their own priorities—farmers, city residents and conservationists” (Williams & Dearen, 2014, p. 1). Although it might seem like a contest between three sides where there can only be one winner, each group is inherently dependent on the other. The citizens need the food produced by the farmers and the farmers need the citizens to stay local to work in their fields. Conservationists work to maintain a natural biodiversity that helps regulate the balance of the system as a whole. Out of these three groups, the least educated is the average citizen, particularly those who reside in urban cities because they do not perceive their immediate well-being to be at risk. This is where the information dissemination becomes important. The California Government website reveals a glimpse of Governor Jerry Brown’s discourse in his official drought declaration on January 17: “I’ve declared this emergency and I’m calling all Californians to conserve water in every way possible” (CA.gov, 2015). I would argue that declaring California’s new state of emergency does less for Californians, in terms of inspiring action, than the use of visual rhetoric present in the Government Website. Urging a population to do something when they do not truly understand the reasons for why they should take action is a waste of time. What John Muir understood much better than Jerry Brown was the importance of making people care and that is exactly what sublime absence does.

Critical Analysis of CA.gov/drought

The California government has a responsibility to show its citizens the harm that is being done to the land and the way they have chosen to do so is by using five specific visual techniques

on their website. The website also includes news stories which, similar to the compare and contrast pictures, reveal the shift from a state of concern to a state of crisis. What will follow is an analysis of the visual techniques employed, which includes: a use of comparable perspectives, lines, structures, color, and time. I will prove that the use of all of the techniques together is what generates the feeling of sublime absence.

In order for before and after shots to be effective, the perspective of each picture needs to be as close to identical as possible. This lays the foundation for all the other visual techniques. As shown in image one, for example, you can see the bridge pylon is roughly centered in each photograph.

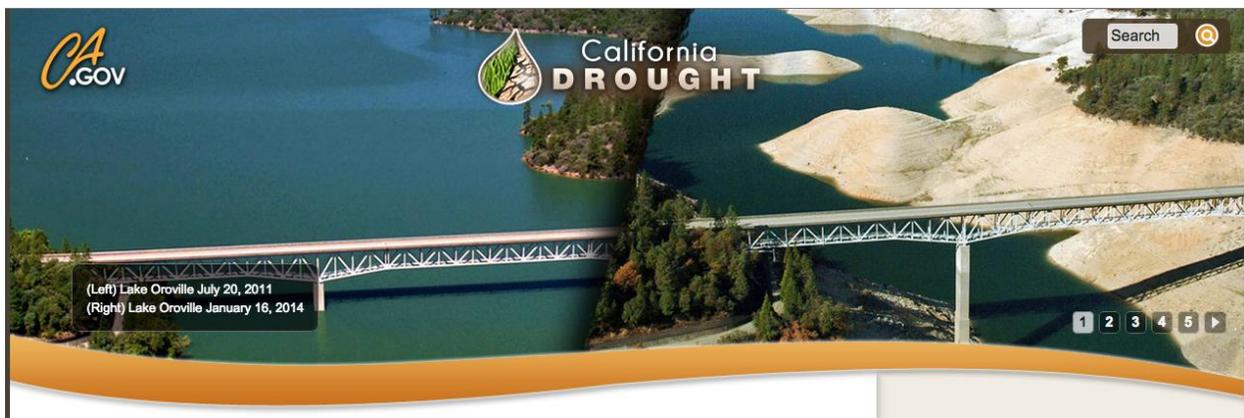


Image one: Lake Oroville Bridge

Photo Credit: CA.gov/drought

Ensuring that each photo is an identical shot increases the objectivity of the study. With the perspective held constant, it is much easier to observe everything that has shifted, for instance,

the relocated boat docks in image two.

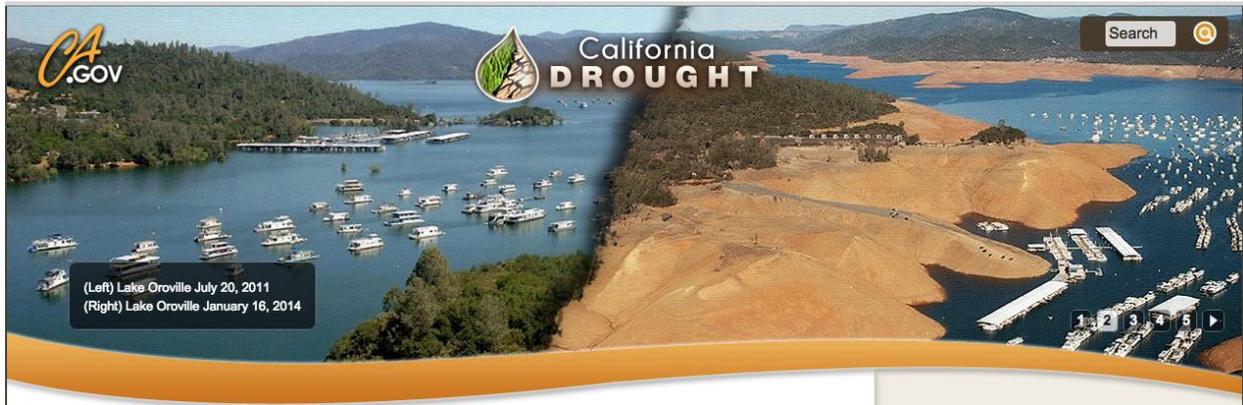


Image two: Lake Oroville

Photo Credit: CA.gov/drought

A note about photograph three is that it seems to have the highest potential for objectivity. It is unclear whether or not the other photos are taken from a mountaintop or a helicopter, but with number three, it is indicated that the images were taken from a NASA satellite. Satellites can use specific coordinates to capture a picture that is literally the same frame of reference as the previous. Another aspect that the satellite pictures add is the scope of the perspective. As opposed to a lake, which requires a much closer examination, the reduced snowpack is observable from outer space. There is a certain significance that is attributed to things that are observable from space. Some of the greatest wonders of the ancient and modern worlds are considered grand because they are observable from space, for instance, the Great Wall of China, the Great Pyramid of Giza, or the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. By this logic, we are undergoing the Great Sierra Nevada Snowmelt. What might be the implications of this new reality? Perhaps naming it the Great Sierra Nevada Snowmelt first, will inspire a reaction from the public in the same way they react to the other “Greats.”



Image three: Sierra Nevada snowmelt

Photo Credit: CA.gov/drought

Contrary to number three, photograph four does not match the perspectives of the two photographs. By giving it a close look, one notices that the angle at which they took the shot and the altitude are both different in each picture. This either means that this is the only picture taken from a helicopter or there was simply less attention to detail compared to the other images. One thing is for certain: it hurts the credibility and the effectiveness of the comparison pictures because our view of how much the water has actually receded is significantly skewed.

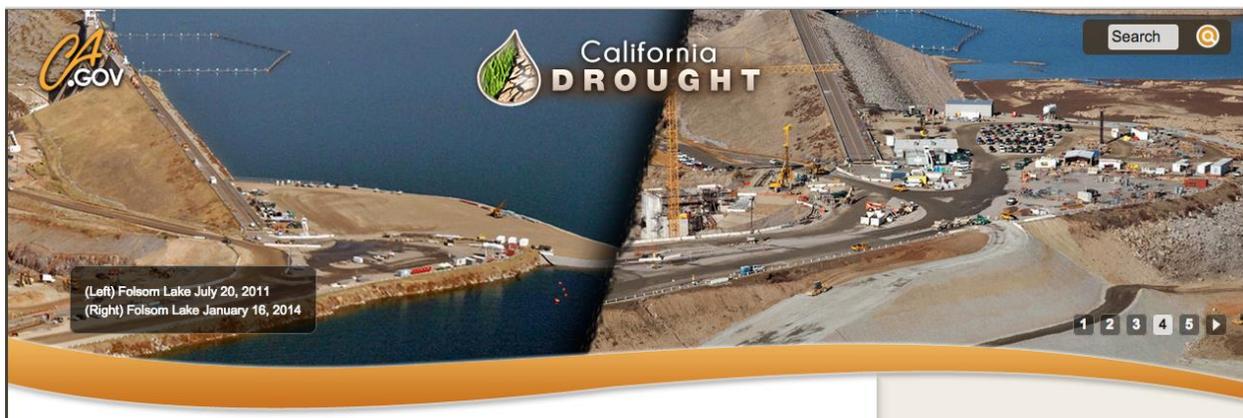


Image four: Folsom Lake

Photo Credit: CA.gov/drought

One feature that all the pictures have in common is a clear indication of lines and how they have shifted. The images are all separated down the middle by a tattered looking line that indicates the passage of time. It gives the appearance of someone cutting photos out of an album and laying them next to each other to compare the two. The most significant lines for

demonstrating the actual change in water level is the shore lines. In image two, for instance, the change of coastline is very obvious. The tree line in the before picture is touching the water, whereas on the right you can see where the former lake bed now touches the water. Picture one also shows the water line really well. The water line is important because it helps with the sense of time, which will be touched upon later. Essentially, with the shift of the water line, we can see the separation from the dead and the living. The dramatic reshaping of the land is more apparent when you can compare the dead lake bed with the living tree line. The water line that has been clearly established implies that it has been that way for a long time and makes the view that much more unnatural looking. You can also see the line where the bridge has stained the pylon giving just another way of showing how much the water has lowered. Picture one takes the functionality of lines to the next level by using the bridge to also indicate the passage of time. The pictures are aligned perfectly as to make it look like one continuous bridge. Apart from simply having an aesthetic appeal, it implies a journey from the beautiful to the ugly. You can use your eyes to drive across the bridge like a car would into a less natural world. The line that crosses the divide of pictures implies a rapid passage of time, as if to say the change occurred as quickly as it takes to cross a bridge.

Photograph five has a similar effect with the alignment of the Folsom dam. The literal line also serves as a timeline that takes you from one reality to a new one.

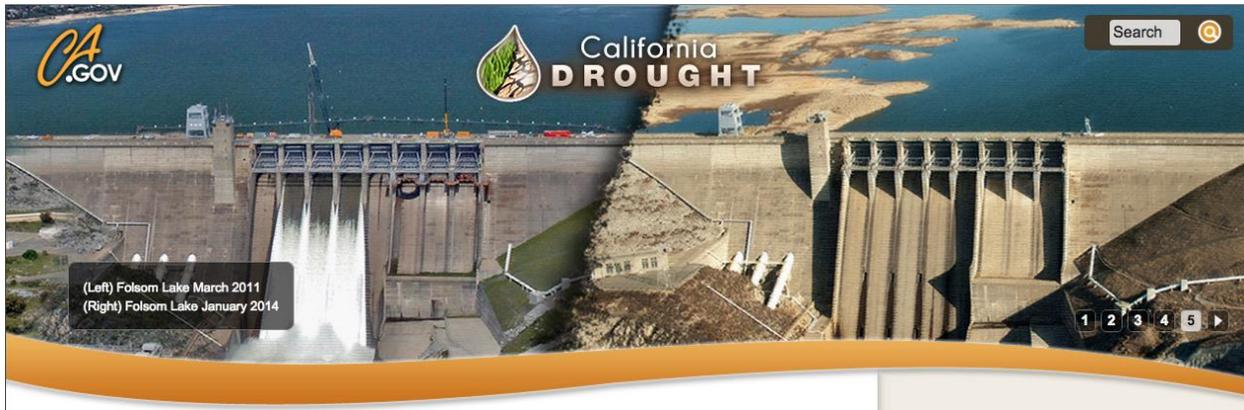


Image five: Folsom Lake Dam

Photo Credit: CA.gov/drought

With both the bridge and the dam, it makes it seem as though the dramatic change in the land happened so quickly, in the history of the land, that it's comparable to the relatively short amount of time it takes to cross a bridge or drive across a dam in the history of humans. Image one has one more line that initially is less obvious, but plays an important role nonetheless. The shadow beneath the bridge in the left picture is parallel to the bridge, but on the right it is not. The explanation might sound obvious, but it is significant. With the water level at normal capacity, it is obviously a flat surface, but in the right picture the shadow is crooked because it is being partially casted on the water and partially on the uneven lake bed. It also gives the viewer a clearer perspective of the distance between the bridge and the water below. Aesthetically speaking, the non-parallel line is less pleasing and adds to the disparity between the before and after pictures.

Another important technique is the use of structures. They are used as an additional point of comparison and are also used to demonstrate how they have been modified to accommodate

the changing conditions of the lake. In picture one, we see the bridge over the lake which at the time it was built was at normal capacity. As noted above, there is a clear line on the bridge pylon showing that the water level must have been consistent enough to stain a clear line. The bridge over Lake Oroville was built to be a specific distance above the water and now that the water is so far below, it changes the nature of the bridge. Just as the loss of water dramatically changes the appearance of the lake, the loss of water also completely changes the appearance of the bridge. This is significant because the person who designed the bridge designed it with a specific vision in mind that did not involve most of the pylons being exposed. In even more recent pictures there is nothing more than an anemic stream running under the bridge. The vastness of the bridge compared to the almost nonexistence of the water beneath it makes its construction almost seem obsolete. No longer does the majesty of the lake match the majesty of the bridge.

An important aspect of the before and after photographs is the contrast between the living and the dead, which is best demonstrated through the use of color, but also with movement. In the before picture of image five, for instance, the primary colors visible are blue, gray, and green. In the right picture, all evidence of vegetation to the sides of the dam is gone and the dam itself looks more yellowish in color. You can see the rocky spine peeking out from beneath the water which adds more yellow to the picture that is not visible in the left picture. Image three, apart from showing the reduced snowpack also shows a much more dead-looking state. The areas where you expect to see white snowpack are green and the areas where you expect to see green, you see shades of yellow and tan. The droplet-shaped logo next to the title *California Drought* at the top of the page represents the contrast between living and dead well as it too is divided down the middle with grass on the left and cracked desolate ground on the right. Pictures one, two, and five use the exposed lakebeds to add a new color that was not a part of the landscape before the

water level was so low. In the cases of one and two, the harsh difference between the green tree line and the brown, rocky bottom of the lake really gives the impression that the lake is becoming a wasteland, incapable of supporting life, which is its primary function, let alone recreational activities. When one thinks of the colors that represent life, green and blue normally come to mind. Most plant life is green and bodies of water look blue. In the photographs with the separation between the water and the tree line, we see a separation between the two colors of life, divided by a color often attributed with deserts and an absence of life.

Another indication of life is movement. In image five not only do we see a change of color from green to brown, but there is also a sense of movement that is present in the before photograph and not the after. The water is shooting off the spillway in the first picture and the second only shows the stains of where the water used to flow. Additionally, the photo shows people working on the road above the dam. Trucks and cranes are present, which means that so are people. In the right picture the dam is completely dry with no visible people present. Since the spillway is not flowing and the water behind is so scarce, the purpose of the dam itself appears less clear. Now it is no more than a tall, vacant concrete structure. The irrelevance of a dam that holds no water further emphasizes the element of human disturbance that can, in part, be blamed for the current state of the drought. The dam is already considered a technologically sublime and an invasion of the landscape, so it is an interesting argument to make for the preservation of the beauty of the lake when it has already been tampered with by thousands of pounds of concrete. Image four creates a counter-perspective to the element of movement. It seems as though there is more commotion and industry in the second picture compared to the first. This either means that one was taken on a non-workday and the other was not or the drought has sparked industry along the newly defined shoreline of Folsom Lake. In the case of image five the absence of movement

represents an absence of life because it is the water that is absent and water represents life. The increase in movement shown in image four does not equate to more life versus death, but perhaps the opposite.

One aspect of the California drought that should be a terrifying thought is the rapidness with which the landscape changed. The photographs on the website indicate a passage of time by giving a date for the before and after pictures. The date stamp of each picture is not the first thing that stands out because it is not visually captivating like the photographs themselves, but after taking a second to look more closely, you notice them. The visual change of the landscape is impressive enough on its own, but when you consider how fast the change has occurred, it is that much more awesome. The photographs from images one, two, four, and five are all a three year difference—2011-2014. The NASA satellite before image was taken in January 2013 and the after picture was taken the same day in 2014. Without knowing that the change in snowpack observed in number three happened in only one year, it does not carry nearly as much significance. The use of the snowpack comparison is valuable for two reasons. First, snow is a direct visual representation of the amount of precipitation the state is experiencing. While the lack of rainfall can be observed through emaciated lakes, there are more factors to consider with the volume of water in lakes than the snow on mountains. Humans are more than capable of sucking lakes dry, even in times of average rainfall. We only harvest the water from mountains after it has melted and run off into lakes, which means that no matter what we do to conserve water, we will still be running at deficit until the drought ceases. This realization that so much is not within our control is what is so terrifying. Second, Sierra Nevada snowmelt is a huge source of California's drinking water. The snowpack and lakes should not be seen as separate entities. The snow from the mountains inevitably makes it to a lake or ends up in an underground water

source. After considering these factors, it becomes clear that image three represents more than meets the eye. The after picture tells us that a major source of life for California was able to run dry in the short period of one year.

The future timeline that is implied by the before and after pictures is what is truly terrifying. If we stay in the direction we are going as rapidly as we are going, then what does the picture look like that comes after the after image? It does not take a mathematician to estimate how long it will take for a lake to dry up completely when it is known that it took three years to reach 40 percent capacity. This realization adds a serious sense of urgency to the situation. The future projection means what we are dealing with is not just a problem of today; it could be a problem of tomorrow and next month and next year if nothing changes.

Time plays a very important role in the creation of the sublime absence response. We cannot understand fully the severity of the drought without knowing exactly how quickly the landscape has changed. In regard to the actual interface of the website and the pictures featured at the top, there is an important element of time to consider. They feature a pause button on the slideshow which allows users to stop the image and inspect further. The creators of the website clearly saw a need for the button because the images are so shocking. The rapid change that occurred is something that cannot be observed in a short period of time. John Muir's version of the sublime response tells us that a sublime object is something that cannot be fully comprehended; certainly, the vastness of such a thing cannot be fully absorbed in the approximate five seconds that the picture is visible before pressing the pause button. Pressing the pause button is the equivalent to the decision to stand on the cliff side for a little longer enjoying the view before making the descent back into Yosemite. This time, it is performed without being present and the feeling of wonder is replaced with discomfort. The very need for the pause

button comments on the unnatural state of the landscape because, under normal circumstances, a photograph of the identical frame of reference separated by only one or two years would not require such close inspection. Our understanding of the earth sciences tells us that landscape change is natural when it is slow and methodical. For instance, tectonic activity resulted in Earth changing appearance from one giant landmass to how we understand it today—a change that occurred over hundreds of millions of years. It is believed that Earth has experienced five ice ages in its 4.5 billion year history. Change happens, but not so quickly that we should be able to witness significant difference from one year to the next. The purpose of this argument is not to condemn a perpetrator, but merely to expose the unnatural state in which we find California. The website features a pause button because otherwise we literally would not have enough time to fully comprehend what we are looking at. One could say that the pictures would not be featured and the webpage would never have been created if there was not a clear problem to be addressed, but the actual interaction the site features (the pause button) serves to further enforce importance of the before and after images.

Each of these elements contributes a specific purpose to evoking the overwhelming feelings which make the sublime so unique. Sublime absence works rhetorically only when we are exposed to content that clearly points out how the land has been modified by human interference. We feel the internal tensions that are unique to the sublime absence response because we can compare the two photographs and objectively say that the land has changed and it has changed for the worse. We know this by observing how little time has passed, by observing how far the water lines have shifted, and even by watching the colors that represent life fade into those that represent desolation. Humans are captivated by imagery because it is the closest they can get to actually being present. This artificial presence that the images on CA.gov

create, provide the website with tremendous persuasive potential. Each image proves to us that “that which has been taken away from the land” (in this case the water) has directly helped to redefine the nature of the land. With a lake, the water it possesses defines it as a lake. If the lake is at 20 percent capacity, can we still consider it a lake? Because as observed in the images above, the lake certainly will no longer possess the same utility as it once did and certainly not the same beauty. The imagery can have as much rhetorical potential in the world, but if the exposure is lacking, the “means of persuasion,” as Aristotle defines rhetoric, will have no outlet.

Social Media Presence

Analyzing the images on the Ca.gov page can reveal just how effective imagery can be when done correctly, but none of it matters if the government page is not providing its visitors necessary information to elicit serious change through the feelings inspired by sublime absence. In an NPR podcast, Sam Sanders reports on what has been called “drought shaming.” This is a trend that has been observed on social media outlets such as Twitter. When normally it might be uncomfortable to call a neighbor out for their eco-unfriendly practices, it is much easier to do so anonymously on the internet or at least without the need for direct confrontation. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram represent the voice of the people, while CA.gov is the opposite. Since the messages being produced by the California government are confined to their own page, they do not have nearly the same potential as messages circulating the heavily visited social media sites. According to NPR, if you “search the hashtags #DroughtShame or #DroughtShaming, you'll find hundreds, if not thousands of very public reprimands of water wasters, often with pictures, video, and a lot of addresses. Some tweets are directed right towards Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti. Others have photos that show the water wasters themselves” (NPR, 2015, min. 3). The only reason the internet is such a vast resource and tool for information

dissemination is because people share information. People will not just happen upon the California drought website and, if they do, there is not a strong emphasis to share the information. The page features a small logo that is intended to encourage sharing via Facebook, Twitter, and email, but nowhere does it actually use the word “share.” The California government has no official Facebook or Twitter page, but people are sharing the CA.gov/drought link. I would argue that, in order to achieve the best response, the California government must encourage their content to go viral. In early 2015, the internet erupted in a debate about whether or not a dress was blue and black or white and gold. People do not need to genuinely care about what it is they are talking about before it suddenly becomes something everyone is talking about. This is what the California government needs to understand about why Californians response has fallen so flat. It has fallen short of becoming viral, but all one has to do is enter the URL in the search bar of Facebook and Twitter to see how many people are sharing it. It is unclear how the social media posts are actually affecting action, but some of the posts do have action-oriented language. For instance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency posts tips that like: “Set water softeners to a minimum number of refills to save water, chemicals and energy: ca.gov/drought/” (Twitter, 2015). Others, like the City of Stockton, take a more passive approach with messages like: “Yes, California is facing one of the most severe droughts on record, more info: <http://ca.gov/drought/>” (Twitter, 2015). On Facebook, more people post the actual images from the homepage slideshow. This is the clearest indication of the alluring qualities of the images. It can be inferred that their inclinations to share the images were a result of a uniquely sublime quality they possess, though there is not enough clear evidence to suggest that the CA.gov page has inspired a significant ideological change in Californians, and therefore action.

Conclusion

The inspiration for Sublime Absence originated from my personal experience visiting Lopez Lake in Arroyo Grande, California, where I felt mixed feelings of awe and disgust. I have been to the top of Yosemite Falls and I can easily compare my feelings looking over a dry lake bed to looking across the valley at Half Dome. In the case of Lopez Lake, though, the awe was laced with feelings of serious concern for the future of California and a personal responsibility to do something.



Lopez Lake February, 2015

Photo Credit: Mitchell Cooledge

Today, we can witness humankind's ability to modify what was once believed to be "primeval, untamed, and forever untamable *Nature*," (Thoreau, 2009, p. 134). As the sublime response has been reinterpreted over the years, there has been a shift in the balance between the initial apprehension of the sublime object and the spiritual exaltation aspect. In the case of the destruction of the land, the spiritual exaltation component has been replaced with a guilty feeling. The viewpoint of nature as the "forever untamable" potentially causes more of an issue by encouraging the male hegemonic ideal of conquering the land and suffering no consequences for it. The discovery of the sublime absence response was a direct result of the era we live in.

Just as Longinus saw a need to explain what he saw as sublime, and John Muir needed a way to help preservationists to fall in love with Yosemite, I needed a way to explain how I felt when I stared at the all-too-literal *no fishing* sign (pictured above) at Lopez Lake. What requires exploration in future works, is whether or not seeing a picture of something that is sublime has the same potential to evoke the conflicting feelings that make the sublime something worth further study. What is clear is that there is a need for change in California and the most powerful tool we have at our fingertips is the internet and, more specifically, images that are shared via internet and social media applications. Just in the time that I have been writing this paper I have seen substantial changes have already taken place. For instance, turf reduction has begun on the campus of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. In residential areas, I have witnessed more yellow lawns. I hope this means an ideological shift is coming, making it socially unacceptable to have a green lawn. We have already seen the start of this with #DroughtShaming. One thing is for certain, only time, the ultimate dictator, will tell us what is to come of California.

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