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The Sublime in the Shipwreck Motif of Narrative Ballets*

– An Inquiry through Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Theory –

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I. Introduction

The the shipwreck motif has recurred with striking persistence throughout the history of human culture. From Odysseus's voyage in ancient epic to Shakespeare's 『The Tempest』(1611), from the turbulent seascapes of Romantic painting to contemporary cinema, the shipwreck has functioned not merely as a scene of accident but as a symbol that encapsulates the confrontation between humanity and nature, survival and destruction, fate and redemption. This image simultaneously recalls the finitude of human existence and the boundless force of nature, evoking fear and awe in the face of powers that remain beyond human control. Accordingly, the shipwreck is not simply a representation of disaster but is closely tied to the sublime, a concept that has occupied a central position in aesthetics since the modern era.

Edmund Burke(1729-1797), recognized as a pioneer in the categorization of aesthetic experience, provided a decisive framework for understanding the sublime in his 『A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful』(1757)(Youngjae Roh, 2022, p. 17). Burke distinguished between two categories of human emotional response to nature and objects: the beautiful and the sublime. Beauty derives from attributes such as small scale, harmonious proportion, and gentle form, which elicit pleasure and affection. The sublime, however, emerges under entirely

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different conditions. Burke identified terror, danger, infinity, vastness, power, darkness, and magnitude of motion as sources of the sublime, arguing that these qualities are most intensely experienced when they threaten the instinct of self-preservation. At the same time, when such fear is perceived from a safe distance without actual physical threat, individuals experience a distinctive form of pleasure in which fear and awe are simultaneously aroused. At this juncture, the sublime functions as an aesthetic category that transforms mere crisis into aesthetic experience.

Building on "Reading the Water Humanities through Dance"(Youngjae Roh, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c), this study investigates the human experiences and networks of meaning surrounding water as they are articulated within the art form of ballet. In human cultural history, water carries an ambivalent significance as both the source of life and the origin of catastrophe, with the shipwreck serving as the symbolic apex of this duality. The shipwreck scene simultaneously recalls the finitude of human existence and the boundless force of nature, embodying the aesthetics of the sublime in its fusion of fear and awe. Because ballet integrates music, movement, and stage design as a total art form, the shipwreck motif has functioned as a crucial device for generating dramatic turning points and emotional intensification in the theatrical space. For this reason, ballet provides a particularly fitting case for reflecting on the aesthetics of the sublime.

Accordingly, this study analyzes the shipwreck motif in 「*Le Corsaire*」(1856), a Romantic ballet; 「*The Winter's Tale*」(2014), a contemporary British ballet; and 「*Shim Chung*」(1986), a modern Korean ballet. The analysis draws primarily on performance recordings and live observations, including American Ballet Theatre's production of 「*Le Corsaire*」(2000), which follows Petipa's version and is widely regarded as one of its most faithful interpretations; The Royal Ballet's 「*The Winter's Tale*」(2015); and the author's repeated live viewings of 「*Shim Chung*」 performed by the Universal Ballet. By examining these works across distinct historical periods and cultural contexts, the study elucidates how the shipwreck motif is staged and what sublime meanings it produces. This analysis demonstrates that the shipwreck is not a mere stage effect but an aesthetic device that reveals the tension between humanity and nature, danger and salvation, finitude and transcendence. Furthermore, by illuminating shipwreck scenes in ballet as a locus for humanistic reflection, this study explores the potential of extending the humanities of water through the medium of dance.

The scholarly significance of this research is fourfold. First, it reexamines the aesthetics of the sublime as realized in ballet through the shipwreck motif. Second, by offering a comparative analysis that spans the Romantic and the contemporary, as well as Western and Korean traditions, it highlights both the universality and the specificity of the shipwreck motif. Third, it expands interdisciplinary approaches that bridge literature, visual art, and philosophy by situating ballet as a total art form, positioning dance as an alternative methodology within the humanities. Finally, this study proposes a new pathway for reading the Water Humanities through dance by foregrounding the shipwreck as an

artistic motif.

This study proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 outlines Burke's concept of the sublime, focusing on its categories, attributes, and effects. Chapter 3 applies this framework to a comparative analysis of shipwreck scenes in「*Le Corsaire*」,「*The Winter's Tale*」, and「*Shim Chung*」, highlighting how the sublime is staged across distinct historical and cultural contexts. Chapter 4 synthesizes these findings, concluding that the shipwreck motif in ballet embodies the aesthetics of the sublime while functioning as a site of humanistic reflection through dance.

The scope of this research is deliberately limited. The analysis is confined to three narrative ballets in which the shipwreck motif is central, and the theoretical discussion draws primarily on Burke's aesthetics, without extended treatment of Kant or later revisions of the sublime. While later philosophers such as Kant, Lyotard, and Adorno have offered diverse interpretations of the sublime, reinterpreting and, in some cases, critically revising Burke's foundational conception, these perspectives still emerge from the intellectual lineage that Burke initiated. Accordingly, this study focuses on Burke's theory, which most directly engages with the affective origins of the sublime, to secure analytical depth and theoretical consistency. These boundaries sharpen the study's focus, clarifying the sublime dimensions of the shipwreck motif within a defined theoretical and artistic frame.

II. Burke's Concept of the Sublime and Aesthetic Categories

In his『A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful』(1757), Edmund Burke (1729–1797) criticizes Longinus's『Peri Hypsous』(1554)[1], the earliest extant treatise on the sublime, and introduces the sublime as a new aesthetic category. Traditionally incorporated into sixteenth-century neoclassical aesthetics, Longinus's treatise, composed around the first century, emphasizes formal concerns. By contrast, Burke draws a sharp distinction between beauty and the sublime, thereby creating a novel aesthetic category. This distinction represents a reaction against the prevailing neoclassical conception of art—rational and normative—and instead positions beauty within the sphere of human passion, treating it as a matter of "pleasure"(Jung-Hee Ki, 2002, p. 146). In so doing, Burke foregrounds the experiential and psychological dimensions of human encounters

1) 『Peri Hypsous』(On the Sublime) is the earliest extant treatise on the theory of the sublime. Although traditionally attributed to the third-century rhetorician Cassius Longinus, the authorship remains uncertain; the earliest surviving manuscript(Parisinus Graecus 2036, 10th century, Bibliothèque nationale de France) lists both "Dionysius Longinus" and "Dionysius or Longinus," leading modern scholars to identify the author as an anonymous first-century writer, now referred to as Pseudo-Longinus. The treatise was translated and published in French in 1674 by the classical theorist Nicolas Boileau(Traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours), whose rationalist reinterpretation brought the text into the framework of French classicism. Boileau's version profoundly influenced eighteenth-century European aesthetics, but in doing so it reduced the original's richness and polysemy, transforming it into a more prescriptive and rule-bound theory of the sublime.

with natural objects. For Burke, the purpose of the sublime lies in “the elevation of the mind overcoming the precarious state of self-preservation provoked by pain and danger, such as that of death”(Min Su Kim, 2018, p. 81).

According to Burke, beauty is associated with small scale, smooth texture, harmony, and delight, whereas the sublime entails overwhelming magnitude, roughness, and, above all, the emotions of fear and awe. As he writes, “They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure”(Burke, 2004, p. 157). In other words, while beauty is grounded in pleasure, the sublime is rooted in the affect of pain and fear. Burke further contrasts their effects as reverence and affection, noting that “The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing”(Burke, 2004, p. 147). Thus, the sublime is defined as an affect of submission before forces that overwhelm human capacity, whereas beauty arises from the affection evoked by what is small and pleasing.

Focusing on the experience of the sublime, Burke explains its qualities and the characteristics of external objects that evoke it by linking them to human sensory perception and psychological response. Among the essential attributes he identifies, danger and fear are paramount. The source of the sublime arises above all from objects and scenes that recall pain and danger. On this point, he emphasizes: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger ⋯ is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”(Burke, 2004, p. 86). In other words, objects that threaten survival leave the deepest impressions on human emotion, and such stimuli, when perceived at a certain remove rather than leading to direct destruction, are transfigured into aesthetic experience. In this context, fear emerges as the central principle of the sublime. Fear is in every case “the ruling principle of the sublime”(Burke, 2004, p. 102), and the sublime is constituted not as a variation of pleasure but as a transformation of the negative affect of fear.

This perspective extends to Burke’s discussion of vastness and infinity. Magnitude that cannot be comprehended at a glance overwhelms human perception, while boundless spectacles evoke a distinctive emotion in which wonder and terror converge. His observation that “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime”(Burke, 2004, p. 114) confirms this point. Spatial and temporal infinity expose the limits of human cognition and produce what Burke describes as “delightful horror”(Burke, 2004, p. 115). Numerical infinity generates a similar effect. Scenes such as the multitude of stars in the night sky, unending waves, or innumerable crowds surpass human capacity for calculation and thereby intensify the sentiment of the sublime.

The sublime is also closely tied to the operation of power. As Burke states, “I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power”(Burke, 2004, p. 107), the sublime is always related to the manifestation of force. Yet this force is not one subject to human control but rather a threatening

power capable of producing destruction at any moment. Harmless or compliant force cannot be sublime; it is instead unpredictable and potentially dangerous power that arouses sublime emotion.

In addition, darkness and obscurity are vital conditions of the sublime. Burke explains, “To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary”(Burke, 2004, p. 102), noting that what renders an object fearful is not clarity but indistinctness. Invisible forms and unfamiliar sounds stimulate the imagination and provoke fears far greater than the object itself might warrant. In this sense, the sublime is intensified by concealment and ambiguity. Burke also underscores the effect of silence: extreme stillness and quiet deprive the senses, induce unease, and heighten fear, thereby amplifying the experience of the sublime.

Finally, Burke draws attention to movement and suddenness. He observes, “A sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power ⋯ In everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger”(Burke, 2004, p. 123). What this emphasizes is that the abrupt onset or cessation of a powerful sound, or an unforeseen movement, stimulates the senses instantaneously and provokes an instinctive recognition of danger. Gradual and predictable change rarely produces the sentiment of the sublime, whereas sudden shocks or discontinuous shifts overwhelm the mind and elicit an intense sublime response.

Burke also emphasizes simplicity and uniformity as further conditions of the sublime. Extreme complexity, he argues, is less effective than simple structure, and uniform repetition surpasses irregular variety in overwhelming human perception. Endless lines or rows of columns, for example, suggest infinity within monotony and reinforce the impression of the sublime. Together with danger, fear, infinity, obscurity, suddenness, silence, simplicity, and uniformity, these conditions constitute the principal categories that define the essence of the sublime. The key concepts and attributes discussed thus far are summarized in Table 1.

<Table 1> Burke’s Key Attributes of the Sublime

Attribute	Summary
Pain & Terror	Fundamental source of the sublime; threats to life that, at a safe distance, transform fear into aesthetic pleasure
Vastness	Immense dimensions beyond perceptual grasp, producing awe and overwhelm
Infinity	Endless space, time, or innumerable multiplicity(stars, waves, crowds) exceeding human comprehension
Power	Uncontrollable and potentially destructive force resisting human mastery
Darkness & Obscurity	Ambiguity and uncertainty stimulating imagination and intensifying fear
Suddenness	Abrupt changes or unexpected movements that trigger immediate awareness of danger
Other conditions (Silence, Simplicity, Uniformity)	Stillness, repetition, and monotony reinforcing the intensity of the sublime

Burke's conception of the sublime thus derives from multiple attributes, including danger and fear, vastness and infinity, power, darkness and obscurity, and movement and suddenness. Yet for these qualities to produce the sentiment of the sublime, a particular psychological condition must be present—namely, the paradoxical experience in which fear is transformed into pleasure. He terms this "delightful terror" and explains that "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close"(Burke, 2004, p. 86). In other words, when threat is directly imminent, fear remains mere dread, but when it is experienced at a certain distance, the emotion is transfigured into enjoyment. What emerges here is that the aesthetic effect of the sublime rests not on pain itself but on the consciousness of its absence and the awareness of escape from danger—that is, on negative pleasure.

For this reason, the sublime can be intensified through artistic representation. Art enables the audience to experience the affect of fear indirectly without being exposed to actual danger. Burke likewise observes, "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful"(Burke, 2004, p. 86). Fear encountered not in real suffering but in imitation and imagination through art allows for aesthetic distance, producing an experience of threat without harm—fear transmuted into pleasure. Thus, the sublime is not only an emotion arising from natural phenomena but also an aesthetic experience that can be represented and amplified through artistic means.

III. Choreographing the Sublime through the Shipwreck Motif

1. The Shipwreck Scene and the Spectacular Sublime in 「*Le Corsaire*」

Among the representative works of nineteenth-century Romantic ballet, 「*Le Corsaire*」(1856) was first staged by Joseph Mazilier in 1856, with Marius Petipa's later revision becoming the most widely known version today. The ballet is notable for its exotic setting and adventurous narrative, but above all for its climactic shipwreck scene, which employs stage machinery and visual effects to present sheer visual overwhelm as the culmination of the work. In this respect, the ballet epitomizes the spectacular aesthetics of its era. Derived only loosely from Byron's narrative poem 「*The Corsair*」, the ballet departs from the source text's complex character structure and tragic conclusion, recasting the story as a Romantic narrative centered on the love between Conrad and Medora. In this adaptation, Conrad and Medora successfully escape and embark on a voyage symbolizing a new beginning, only to encounter a massive storm that sinks their ship; the two narrowly survive, and the narrative concludes with a dramatic "happy ending." The final shipwreck scene combined the stage machinery

of the Paris Opéra with canvas panoramas, steam, sound, and lighting effects to recreate a storm and waves with remarkable realism, and it is remembered as a key factor in the production's success.

This vivid staging goes beyond the narrative function of the scene and can be understood as an attempt to organize an image of nature's force as an immediate presence. The critic Benoît Jouvin described the staging as "rendered with a complete illusion," noting, "The Opéra stage seemed to have taken on suddenly the vast proportions of the open sea ··· it was reality in all its grandiose horror".[2] Deeply impressed by this staging, the painter Gustave Doré also produced a sketch of the shipwreck for a magazine in 1856, depicting towering waves, lightning, and the shattered hull. His drawing visualized the scene's technical and iconographic codes—vastness, power, and suddenness(Figure 1).

<Figure 1>「*The last scene of Le Corsaire*」(1856) by Gustave Doré[3]

From the perspective of Burke's conception of the sublime, the shipwreck scene in「*Le Corsaire*」can be understood above all as the convergence of vastness and power. The images of waves and storm engulfing the entire stage reveal the overwhelming scale of nature that exceeds human control, serving as a theatrical translation of what Burke identifies as one of the sources of the sublime, "Greatness of Dimension"(Burke, 2004, p. 114). Moreover, the destructive imagery of the shipwreck extends beyond decorative spectacle, eliciting the affect of danger and fear in direct correspondence with Burke's analysis. He argues that the evocation of pain and danger constitutes the most powerful source of the sublime(Burke, 2004, p. 86), and the scene summons precisely this affect of terror through artistic representation. Because the fear in this context entails no real threat, it is transfigured

2) The Marius Petipa Society(n.d.). "Le Corsaire". ***The Marius Petipa Society***. <https://petipasociety.com/le-corsaire/, 2025. 09. 01>.

3) Doré, G. (1856, April 5). The last scene of Le Corsaire, ***Jounal Amusant***. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5506691z/f6.item?lang=EN, 2025, 09, 04>.

into an aesthetic experience, thereby realizing on stage the effect of "pleasurable terror." Furthermore, given Burke's emphasis on the latent destructiveness of power(Burke, 2004, p. 107), the shipwreck scene may be interpreted as a paradigmatic instance in which the grandeur of natural force is displayed while its potential threat is simultaneously underscored. In this way, the scene exemplifies how the conditions of vastness, danger, and power are embodied in theatrical spectacle as constitutive elements of the sublime.

In the history of ballet, the shipwreck scene has functioned not merely as a spectacle but as a decisive device that determines the impression and even the success of the work—that is, as a coup de théâtre. At its Paris premiere in 1856, critics already attributed the ballet's success to the spectacular staging of the shipwreck, with one contemporary account noting that "Crosnier has saved the Opera by a shipwreck".[4] When Petipa completed the 1899 production for the Imperial Theatres in Russia, the final shipwreck was further amplified, and even in the twentieth century critics continued to regard the moment "the pirate galleon splits in two and its crew are flung screaming into the stormy brine" as the essence of the ballet's climax(Mackrell, 2007).

In the mid-twentieth century Soviet period, the place and function of the shipwreck within the ballet underwent variation. In 1955, Pyotr Gusev restructured the libretto by relocating the shipwreck scene from the conclusion to the prologue, presenting the storm and subsequent drifting at the outset, while the ending resumed with a new voyage.[5] This revision diluted the affect of tragic sublimity in favor of reinforcing the clear structure of an adventure narrative. By contrast, twenty-first-century revivals, such as the 2007 Bolshoi production, restored the shipwreck to the finale, combining traditional stage machinery with restrained film projection to amplify the motion, sound, and visual grandeur of the storm in a contemporary manner. A review in The Guardian praised this restaging as "Using discreet film technology alongside traditional stagecraft to create the stomach-lashing illusion of a storm at sea"(Mackrell, 2007).

Such creative realizations confirm that the shipwreck is indispensable to 「*Le Corsaire*」, while also illustrating the diverse technical and aesthetic directions pursued by contemporary Western ballet companies. In 2013, American Ballet Theatre(ABT) was praised for its realistic simulation of a storm through the integration of a full-scale ship set with lighting and sound effects that conveyed the vessel heaving in the waves(Frankel, 2013). In contrast, the same year's production by English National Ballet(ENB) was criticized as comparatively weak, with reviewers remarking that "The shipwreck is tame"(Tanitch, 2014). These divergent assessments reveal that even the same scene can vary

4) The Marius Petipa Society(n.d.). "Le Corsaire". ***The Marius Petipa Society***. <https://petipasociety.com/le-corsaire/, 2025. 09. 01>.

5) Mariinsky Theatre(n.d.). "Le Corsaire: Repertoire". ***Mariinsky Theatre***. <https://www.mariinsky.ru/en/playbill/repertoire/ballet/korsar/#:~:text=Prologue%20The%20Shipwreck%20Three%20sailors,The%20boat%20sinks, 2025. 09. 04>.

significantly in its intensity of sublimity and spectacle depending on production circumstances and directorial choices.

In sum, the shipwreck scene in「*Le Corsaire*」embodies the essence of the spectacular sublime in Romantic ballet. Organized through stage machinery that reproduces waves and storms, monumental imagery, and the total integration of lighting and sound, the scene generates an irreducibly overwhelming image. Within it are condensed the very conditions of the sublime as outlined by Burke—vastness, power, danger, and suddenness—and the effect of the sublime is heightened not through symbolic suggestion or narrative transition but through the sensory spectacle itself. In the history of ballet, the shipwreck scene has been established as a decisive device adorning the conclusion of the work, functioning as the coup de théâtre that determines its success and lasting impression.

Moreover, the placement and role of the scene have shifted according to period and context. In the Soviet adaptation of the twentieth century, the shipwreck was relocated to the prologue to provide dramatic impetus at the outset, whereas in twenty-first-century revivals it returned to the finale to create a sublime conclusion. These variations demonstrate that, despite changes in stage technology and libretto revision, the shipwreck scene continues to serve as the pivotal element responsible for the dramatic resolution of the ballet. Ultimately, the shipwreck scene in「*Le Corsaire*」transcends ornamental spectacle, reorganizing the Romantic conception of nature—its overwhelming power and the awe it inspires—into visual theater, and stands as one of the most vivid and resplendent realizations of the Burkean sublime on the ballet stage.

2. The Shipwreck Scene and Narrative Sublime in「*The Winter's Tale*」

Christopher Wheeldon's ballet「*The Winter's Tale*」, premiered at the Royal Ballet in 2014, is a narrative ballet based on Shakespeare's play of the same name. Shakespeare's original is well known as a "problem play," difficult to classify because it mixes comedy and tragedy. Wheeldon successfully translated the work's complex emotions and messages into the language of ballet, earning critical acclaim. With its dramatic reversals of betrayal, abandonment, death, and forgiveness, interwoven with jealousy, love, and devotion, the original play encompasses both human narrative and mythic fantasy. The ballet extends this literary narrative into a cinematic stage world of vivid colors and refined choreography, offering a new aesthetic horizon for contemporary narrative ballet.

In Shakespeare's play, the storm and shipwreck scene occurs in Act 3, Scene 3, functioning as a pivotal turning point in the drama. The tragic trajectory, set in motion by the jealousy and misjudgment of King Leontes of Sicily, enters a new phase here. Antigonus, commanded by Leontes to abandon the newborn Perdita, arrives on the coast of Bohemia. After laying down the child, he attempts to depart, but a violent storm erupts, the ship is torn apart, and the sailors are lost at sea. Above all, Antigonus himself disappears in one of Shakespeare's most famous stage directions, "Exit,

pursued by a bear." Symbolizing a fate of destruction, this scene transcends a mere depiction of natural disaster, representing instead the collapse of human guilt and falsehood before the wrath and transcendental power of nature. At the same time, because the abandoned child Perdita later grows up in Bohemia to guide the narrative toward reconciliation and redemption, the storm, shipwreck, and the bear serve as the hinge that closes the tragic first half and opens the way to the reconciliatory second half. In other words, the scene functions as a sublime moment in which the overwhelming force of nature radically transforms human destiny.

In adapting this scene for ballet, Wheeldon chose not to reproduce the events literally but to interpret them as a "poetic representation"(Winship, 2016). In Shakespeare's play, the sequence in which Antigonus abandons the infant on the shore, is devoured by a bear, and the ship sinks in the storm is both dramatic and, at the same time, difficult to realize on stage with realism. Rather than confronting this challenge directly, Wheeldon fused the bear's appearance and the violence of the storm into a single image that offers the audience a hallucinatory experience. On stage, the bear appears not as a mere animal but as a personification of nature's force surging up from the depths of the sea.

To realize this effect, the choreographer employed a large-scale stage device: a massive white silk curtain undulates forward like a wave, then suddenly rises and transforms into the shape of a bear <Figure 2>. Wheeldon himself explained the mechanism, describing it as "a beautiful massive silk that's painted with the animal on it: the silk rolls forward like a wave, rears up like a giant tsunami … and you see the bear" (Winship, 2016). His intention was not to present the bear realistically on stage but to render the turbulence and destructive force of nature as a fleeting vision, thereby reinterpreting Shakespeare's stage direction in a modern theatrical idiom.

<Figure 2>「*Exit, pursued by a bear*」in Act 3[6])

This staging functions as more than a literal visualization of the animal's appearance. It enables the audience to perceive, through the figure of the bear, both the power of the sea and the inevitability of human fate. In this scene, the bear becomes the wave and the wave becomes the bear, a symbolic conflation of nature and animal that concentrates the dramatic tension of the play. Ultimately, Wheeldon's choice does not reproduce the events of the original text but instead maximizes theatrical poetics and symbolism, weaving storm, shipwreck, and bear into a single sublime moment.

Such theatrical illusion was widely recognized by contemporary critics as a moment of overwhelming effect. The instant when the white silk shifts from wave to beast intensifies the dramatic tension of Antigonus abandoning the infant by the sea, as captured in the remark that "the child is placed dangerously close to the beast into which the waves of silk have metamorphosed" (Parry, 2014). The transformation of the silk curtain was not simply a visual trick but a modern reworking of the famous stage direction "Exit, pursued by a bear." The moment when the bear emerges upon the silk presents an experience of sublimity in which strangeness and beauty operate simultaneously. One review described it as "a shimmering white silk curtain ⋯ monstrous but also rather beautiful"(Acocella, 2016), highlighting the coexistence of fear and fascination. The overwhelming scale of the staging and its visual transitions were also cited as the most powerful impression of the entire production, as reflected in the observation that "the dazzling effects of spring sunshine, ocean storms ⋯ leave the most powerful impression in this ballet"(Kaufman, 2016).

Critical responses to this scene emphasize not merely admiration for its visual spectacle but, more significantly, its demonstration of how the immensity and inscrutability of nature can be experienced through the stage. In this respect, the scene resonates with Burke's conception of the sublime, particularly the qualities of infinity, darkness, and obscurity. Several of the attributes central to his 『A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful』 are varied and realized in this scene. Above all, the interplay of projection and lighting shapes a space of endless sea and enveloping darkness, evoking the affect of infinity that overwhelms human perception. As Burke notes, infinite dimensions fill the human mind with a kind of "delightful horror"(Burke, 2004, p. 115), and the infinitely extended ocean on stage functions as precisely such a device for eliciting this response. Moreover, the presentation of the bear not as a literal creature but as a shadowy, illusory form closely aligns with Burke's claim that obscurity intensifies fear. He observes that uncertainty and ambiguity render objects more terrifying(Burke, 2004, p. 102), and Wheeldon's staging exploits this principle by stimulating the imagination to produce fears greater than the object itself might warrant.

The shipwreck scene also exceeds the level of depicting natural threat and serves as a structural pivot in the narrative. The abandonment of the child to the sea and the disappearance of Antigonus

6) Morgan, D.(2016, April 16). "Gallery – Royal Ballet in The Winter's Tale". ***DanceTabs***. <https://dancetabs.com/2016/04/gallery-royal-ballet-in-the-winters-tale-2/, 2025, 09, 05>.

mark a moment of death and loss, yet simultaneously provide the seed of reconciliation and renewal. This tension—where death and salvation intersect—confronts the audience with human finitude and the inevitability of fate, evoking what Burke defines as “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”(Burke, 2004, p. 86).

In sum, the shipwreck scene in「*The Winter's Tale*」can be understood not as a spectacular sublime, as in「*Le Corsaire*」, where machinery and visual effects dominate, but as an enactment of narrative sublimity. The symbolic convergence of bear, storm, and silken waves offers an experience that transcends visual spectacle, aesthetically embodying the themes of fate, death, and redemption on stage. Through the effects of darkness, infinity, and uncertainty, the scene demonstrates a contemporary extension of the Burkean sublime. By mediating shifts of ontological awareness and affect, it exemplifies how ballet can rearticulate and transform classical aesthetic concepts within the framework of contemporary stage aesthetics.

3. The Shipwreck Scene and the Ritual Sublime in「*Shim Chung*」

In the Korean folktale *Shimchung-jeon*, Shim Chung chooses to sacrifice herself as an offering to the god of the sea in order to restore her blind father's sight. In「*Shim Chung*」(1986), created by the Universal Ballet and widely credited with introducing Korean ballet to the international stage, this moment is staged as the dramatic climax of the work. On stage, Shim Chung, dressed in white ritual garments, accepts her fate. As a storm breaks at dawn and the ship faces imminent wreck, she offers a prayer and then throws herself into the raging waves. This scene unfolds not as a simple progression of narrative but as a ritualistic act and theatrical representation that elevate her devotion and filial piety into the register of the sublime.

Immediately before her leap, Shim Chung performs ritual gestures of prayer and dance to appease the sea god(the Dragon King), actions presented as symbolic enactments of transcendent devotion. In this sense, the ballet frames her sacrifice as an aestheticized ritual rather than mere narrative necessity. In the pansori tradition *Shimchung-ga*, this episode, known as *Beompi jungnyu*(Crossing the turbulent currents), is likewise regarded as the dramatic climax and celebrated as one of the most beautiful yet tragic moments. The ballet inherits this emotional tenor and shapes the “*Indangsu* scene” as the core aesthetic expression of the work.

The Universal Ballet staged this scene in Act 1, Scene 2: The Deck of the Ship as a spectacle revealing the sublime force of nature. Yet in representing the crisis of shipwreck, the emphasis on the deck setting marks a distinction from「*Le Corsaire*」or「*The Winter's Tale*」. Here, the production heightens the role of dance, impressively embodying crisis and ritual within the confined space of the ship. On the upstage screen, lightning and storm are projected, while the orchestra evokes waves and wind in majestic tones. On deck, the sailors, gripped by fear and confusion, row frantically and

perform vigorous group choreography characterized by dynamic jumps and rapid turns. Torn sails and a swaying vessel give theatrical form to the chaos of shipwreck. The scene overwhelms the senses of the audience, powerfully conveying human fear and helplessness before nature. At the premiere, The Washington Post praised Hoon Sook Moon, who danced the title role, for performing "as if she could calm the storm with her authority and composure." This critical response underscores the dramatic contrast between the violent turbulence of the stage and Shim Chung's sacrificial devotion, generating a profound experience of sublimity.

Beyond its visual spectacle, the *Indangsu* scene in「*Shim Chung*」embodies an ethical sublime grounded in Korean narrative tradition. The Washington Post also noted that, unlike Western ballets which often resolve into tales of love, this work centers on filial piety, sacrifice, and moral fulfillment, praising it as possessing a "moral force few Western ballets can equal"(Tomalonis, 2001). The narrative of Shim Chung thus extends beyond romance, culminating instead in the "reward of virtue" achieved through filial devotion and self-sacrifice.

Shim Chung's leap into the sea is not represented as an individual tragedy of fear but as a sublime act of self-sacrifice for communal salvation. This moment may be interpreted as an ethical transformation of Burke's principle that "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror"(Burke, 2004, p. 67). Whereas Burke's sublime denotes the combination of fear and fascination before vastness and infinity—what he terms "delightful horror"—the sublimity of Shim Chung's sacrifice transcends aesthetic sensation or sensory fear. It is realized instead in the act of offering her finite life for the redemption of the community. Here, infinity does not refer solely to the dimension of nature but to the expansion of individual sacrifice into a transcendent and ethical meaning that enables new forms of salvation and fulfillment at the communal level.

Moreover, Shim Chung's self-sacrifice dramatizes a narrative of transition in which death becomes the medium for new life and redemption. According to the traditional tale, after being sacrificed at *Indangsu*, she enters the realm of the Dragon King, undergoes a transcendent transformation, and is reborn from a lotus flower to be reunited with her father. This structure functions not as mere tragic destruction but as a narrative device of resurrection and reconciliation through sacrifice. The ballet stage likewise adapts this tradition by presenting the *Indangsu* scene as a kind of rite of passage. The audience thus witnesses not only the heroine's death but also the restoration of moral order and communal redemption through that death. As noted in the American premiere, even if the production was considered somewhat limited by Western standards in terms of "the quality of classical ballet," critics acknowledged that its "storytelling and pageantry" profoundly moved audiences(Dunning, 2001). Such responses confirm that the narrative and ritual sublime of Shim Chung transcends the aesthetic pleasure of terror, enabling emotional participation and spiritual catharsis.

The *Indangsu* scene in Universal Ballet's「*Shim Chung*」reveals the sublime in multiple layers,

where Eastern rituality and the spectacular stage idiom of Western ballet converge. The violent imagery of storm and shipwreck fulfills Burke's traditional attributes of the sublime—vastness, power, fear, darkness, and suddenness—while Shim Chung's leap transforms this terror into the ethical values of filial piety and sacrifice. In this way, the sublime extends beyond the sheer force of nature or aesthetic illusion to encompass ethical practice and cultural symbolism. In particular, unlike the conventional love narratives of Western Romantic ballet, 「*Shim Chung*」 situates filial devotion and self-sacrifice at the core of its story, establishing its unique significance. Burke's notions of infinity and the affect of fear are here reconfigured into moral and cultural dimensions, and his idea of "delightful horror" is reinterpreted not as fear before natural infinity but as awe within the act of devotion to the community. Thus, the sublime experienced in the *Indangsu* scene does not remain confined to individual sensation but acquires new resonance on social and ethical levels.

Consequently, the *Indangsu* scene in 「*Shim Chung*」 discloses a dimension of the sublime distinct from the spectacular or narrative sublime exemplified by 「*Le Corsaire*」 and 「*The Winter's Tale*」. It manifests instead as a symbolic sublime that fuses ethical value with aesthetic grandeur, revealing both the universality of the sublime and its Korean particularity at the intersection of Eastern and Western aesthetics. In this sense, the work invites reflection on the sublime in ballet not merely as an aesthetic experience but as an ethical and cultural phenomenon.

In light of these discussions, the comparative analysis of the shipwreck motif in 「*Le Corsaire*」, 「*The Winter's Tale*」, and 「*Shim Chung*」 through the lens of Burke's concept of the sublime may be summarized as follows(Table 2).

<Table 2> Comparative Scheme of Shipwreck Scenes in the Ballets

Ballet	Key Scene & Context	Burkean Sublime Attributes	Choreographic Features	Character of the Sublime
「*Le Corsaire*」	Finale – the new departure of the protagonists ends with a storm and shipwreck	Vastness Power Suddenness	Classical ballet mime and corps de ballet; stage machinery and special effects	Spectacular Sublime – overwhelming impact through mechanical devices and visual grandeur
「*The Winter's Tale*」	Act III, Scene 3 – transition from tragedy to comedy; storm, bear, and shipwreck intertwined	Infinity Darkness Obscurity	Realistic acting with symbolic staging (e.g., silk waves); abstract stage imagery	Narrative Sublime – emphasizes fate, death, and redemption within the storyline
「*Shim Chung*」	Act I, Scene 2 – Shim Chung's leap into the sea, moment of filial sacrifice	Power Terror Suddenness	Classical ballet technique combined with ritualized gestures; dynamic male corps de ballet	Ritual & Ethical Sublime – transforms fear into filial piety and sacrifice, highlighting cultural specificity

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

The shipwreck has served as a powerful symbol recurring throughout the cultural history of humanity, encapsulating the confrontation between human beings and nature, the tension between survival and destruction, and the dynamics of fate and redemption, while persistently evoking the affect of the sublime. This study has explored how such shipwreck scenes are realized on the ballet stage and, by applying Burke's concept of the sublime, has compared and analyzed the different ways in which Eastern and Western works articulate sublimity. The analysis demonstrates that while the three ballets commonly embody the core attributes of the sublime—danger, fear, and the force of nature—they also produce distinct layers of meaning shaped by their respective aesthetic characters and cultural contexts.

Most significantly, although Burke's theory of the sublime emerged from eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse, it has continued to serve as a foundational framework for the study of sublimity, and it remains valid and productive for the analysis of contemporary performing arts. The central elements of the sublime—vastness, infinity, darkness, and fear—still provide crucial criteria for interpreting shipwreck scenes on stage. Through this application, the study has attempted a contemporary rearticulation of classical theory, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Burkean aesthetics to contemporary performance studies.

Taken together, the three ballet reveal distinct articulation of the sublime. The Romantic ballet 「*Le Corsaire*」 exemplifies the realization of the spectacular sublime. The recreation of storm and shipwreck through stage machinery, sets, lighting, and sound produces an overwhelming visual spectacle, typifying Burkean attributes of the sublime such as vastness, power, and suddenness. This staging embodies the essence of the scenic grandeur pursued by Romantic ballet and is significant in that artistic representation enables audiences to experience the aesthetic effect of sublimity by providing terror without real danger.

In Christopher Wheeldon's 「*The Winter's Tale*」, the shipwreck scene is transformed into a narrative sublime. Through the use of multimedia, lighting, and symbolic staging, the storm is represented not merely as a visual spectacle but as a dramatic turning point. Motifs of death, fate, and redemption converge in this scene, while the aesthetic effects of infinity and darkness imprint the finitude of human existence. Thus, the scene not only displays the overwhelming force of nature but also expands sublimity into a narrative device that reveals the inscrutability of human destiny.

The Universal Ballet's 「*Shim Chung*」 embodies the ritual sublime in the *Indangsu* scene. The storm and shipwreck fulfill Burke's sublime attributes of vastness and fear, but Shim Chung's leap transforms the terror of disaster into ethical and cultural dimensions. Her act of filial devotion and self-sacrifice acquires a meaning that transcends danger and death, extending sublimity into moral and

ritual registers. The *Indangsu* scene in Shim Chung thus reinterprets the Korean concepts of sacrifice and redemption within the category of the sublime, demonstrating the intersection of universal affect and cultural particularity.

Through this comparison, it becomes evident that shipwreck scenes in ballet are not merely stage devices or narrative spectacles but aesthetic spaces that simultaneously reveal the confrontation between nature and humanity, danger and salvation, finitude and transcendence. The shipwreck dramatizes the contrast between human fragility and natural power, while at the same time transforming danger and fear into artistic representation, thereby enabling the experience of sublimity. Each work, moreover, demonstrates different modes of the sublime—spectacular, narrative, and ritual—shaped by distinct historical and cultural contexts, thereby attesting to the diversity and expansive potential of the concept of sublimity.

In conclusion, this study has shown that applying Burke's concept of the sublime to the art form of ballet demonstrates how sublimity functions not as a notion bound to a particular period or culture but as a universal affect. At the same time, it confirms that Burke's discourse is not confined to the aesthetic legacy of the past while continuing to contribute meaningfully to contemporary performance analysis and humanistic reflection. Such a rearticulation expands the concept of the sublime beyond a purely aesthetic category into a tool of humanistic thought that can be varied across different times and cultures. Through this study, the shipwreck scene in ballet suggests the possibility of extending ballet aesthetics into a humanistic arena for reflecting on nature, ethics, and existence. Furthermore, this analysis of the shipwreck motif highlights the ways in which dance can contribute to the discourse of the "Water Humanities." The shipwreck scene functions not simply as a stage effect but as a symbolic image that condenses the opposition between humanity and nature, the dynamics of survival and destruction, and the questions of fate and redemption. Exploring these dimensions within the form of ballet provides a basis for expanding the humanistic imagination surrounding water.

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Abstract

The Sublime in the Shipwreck Motif of Narrative Ballets

– An Inquiry through Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Theory –

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The shipwreck has long served as a powerful symbol that crystallizes the confrontation between humanity and nature and evokes the affect of the sublime. Drawing on Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime, this study examines how shipwreck scenes in three narrative ballets—「*Le Corsaire*」, 「*The Winter's Tale*」, and 「*Shim Chung*」—embody different aesthetic dimensions of sublimity. While all three works reveal core attributes such as danger, fear, and power, they diverge into spectacular, narrative, and ritual modes shaped by their distinct cultural contexts. The shipwreck functions not merely as stage spectacle but as an aesthetic space where peril and salvation, finitude and transcendence intersect, transforming fear and awe into artistic experience. Burke's conception of the sublime provides a framework for reinterpreting classical aesthetics in contemporary performance and for envisioning the shipwreck motif, mediated through dance, as a site of renewed artistic and humanistic reflection.

Keywords: Sublime(숭고), Edmund Burke(에드먼드 버크), Shipwreck(난파선), Narrative ballet(서사 발레), Water Humanities(물 인문학)