

The *Old Abnormal*

Continuous Experiencing of Terror and the Negative Sublime

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This article examines the aesthetic dimensions of prolonged Russian aerial terror in Ukrainian rear cities. Moving beyond the dominant paradigm of terror as spectacle, it argues that contemporary Ukrainian experience is shaped by what Tina Polek terms the *new abnormal*, now solidified into an *old abnormal* in which disruption becomes a permanent condition of everyday life. Drawing on Arnold Berleant's theory of negative aesthetics, Kant's notion of the monstrous, and everyday aesthetics (Saito, Bachelard), the article conceptualises civilian life under bombardment as an engaged, embodied, and ethically charged aesthetic condition. It proposes the concept of an anti-sublime to describe how practices of care, repair, and dwelling resist the aesthetic and moral erasure produced by repeated terror. In this framework, meaning arises not from the spectacle of destruction but from the fragile persistence of everyday life under conditions of continuous threat. | *Keywords: Everyday Aesthetics, Negative Sublime, Acoustic Terror, Care, Urban Aesthetics*

1. Introduction

The phrase *new normal* is widely used across sociology and disaster studies to describe the stabilising phase that follows a rupture: societies incorporate disruption into routine and re-establish functional patterns of life. In protracted war, however, this framework falters. It presumes an arc – from crisis to adaptation to a renewed normality – whereas the civilian experience of long war is often defined by the ongoingness of rupture and the exhaustion of adapting to what does not end.

Ukrainian cultural anthropologist Tina Polek (2022) proposes the term *new abnormal* to name precisely this condition: the transformation of emergency into permanence, where unpredictability and danger do not recede but become constitutive of everyday life. In her description of Kyiv in the first months after the full-scale invasion, she registers a paradox: what looks like 'irresponsibility' to newly arrived foreigners – Kyiv residents not rushing to

shelter at every siren – is, in fact, a socially learned survival tactic shaped by the sheer frequency of alarms. The siren, once a signal demanding immediate bodily relocation, becomes background noise unless confirmed by proximate explosions and air defence fire. Polek narrates the mutual bafflement: foreigners are shocked by local nonchalance, while locals are shocked by the foreigners' literal obedience to the siren's imperative, as if an emergency could be treated as an episodic event rather than an extended condition (Tina Polek, 2022).

Polek's conceptual move is essential because it displaces a comforting narrative of recovery and highlights a different temporality: the persistence of threat. Yet in Ukraine the war has already exceeded the time horizon implied by *new abnormal*. When a condition lasts long enough, it ceases to be merely 'new'. It becomes the environment within which childhood, socialisation, and ordinary life unfold. After several years of full-scale war, we can speak about an *old abnormal*: a temporally sedimented abnormality, in which the extraordinary is neither overcome nor newly integrated, but rather repetitively endured. The *old abnormal* does not describe psychological habituation (which is never complete), but a historical fact: time has passed inside the abnormal. Children have grown into conscious age without remembering a non-war civic atmosphere; adults have accumulated years of interrupted sleep; domestic interiors and urban infrastructures have been re-scripted by repeated strikes, blackouts, and the constant possibility of loss.

The central argument of this article is threefold. First, that the *old abnormal* produces a specific aesthetic condition in which the collapse of aesthetic distance is not an exception but a structural feature of everyday life under sustained aerial terror. Second, that this collapse renders the standard application of the sublime – predicated on safety, distance, and spectatorial position – both analytically inadequate and ethically problematic: to designate the experience of those who are targeted as 'sublime' risks aestheticising what should resist aestheticisation. Third, that the concept of the anti-sublime, grounded in practices of care, repair, and engaged dwelling, offers a more adequate framework – one that acknowledges the genuine aesthetic transformation of everyday life under threat without either beautifying violence or denying the aesthetic dimension of wartime experience altogether.

The question is not about aesthetic beautification of violence; it is about whether – and how – perception, embodiment, spatial inhabitation, and the sensory organisation of daily life under threat can be theorised within aesthetics as a discipline. This includes the ethical stakes of aesthetic discourse itself: the risk that aesthetic framing may distance, domesticate, or even romanticise violence.

This risk was articulated with unmatched clarity by Susan Sontag, who warns against assuming a stable collective subject ('we') when looking at other people's pain: "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain" (Sontag, 2003, p. 3). The Ukrainian case introduces a complication that Sontag's framework – developed primarily in relation to

distant observers of others' suffering – does not fully anticipate. In Ukraine, the asymmetry between the one who suffers and the one who looks is not simply a function of geographical or political distance. It is reproduced within the same subject: the civilian who survives an attack at night may, by morning, encounter its documentation on a screen – photographs of the building, thermal imaging footage, the kill count. One becomes, in effect, both the body inside the event and the spectator of its representation. The 'we' that Sontag problematises is thus fractured not only between nations or positions but within the experience of a single person. This internal loop – being inside the spectacle, then seeing oneself inside it via media – does not dissolve the ethical force of Sontag's warning; it radicalises it. The question is no longer only whose pain is seen and by whom, but what happens to perception, affect, and aesthetic response when the boundary between witness and witnessed collapses from within.

To respond to that dilemma, this article proceeds in four movements. It begins from the phenomenology of the civilian body under aerial attack – the sensory, spatial, and temporal restructuring of everyday life in Kyiv. It then examines dominant aesthetic frameworks for thinking about terror, centred on the spectacle paradigm, and identifies their structural inadequacy for a situation in which the spectator and the victim coincide. Drawing on negative aesthetics and theories of the quotidian sublime, it develops a conceptual vocabulary for this experience. Finally, it proposes that practices of care, repair, and engaged dwelling constitute an anti-sublime that resists the aestheticisation of violence while acknowledging the genuine aesthetic transformation of everyday life under sustained threat.

This is not an ethnography in the conventional sense, though it draws on ethnographic attentiveness to daily practices. It is also not a trauma narrative, though it speaks from within a traumatising environment. Methodologically, it is closest to phenomenological description combined with critical aesthetic theory. The core empirical material is my own experience as a civilian in Kyiv during continuous aerial terror, including sheltering routines with my family and observations of damaged urban sites.

This positionality matters. Many studies of terror and terrorism – especially within aesthetics – begin from mediated encounter: film, photography, television, found footage formats, or the reception of spectacular events transmitted globally. Such scholarship is valuable, but it often presumes an observer who retains the option of distance. In my case, I write from 'the other side of the camera,' not as an image-consumer but as a body whose sleep, hearing, domestic space, and sense of time are reorganised by the repeated prospect of impact.

This does not grant epistemic privilege over all other positions, but it does alter the ethical configuration of description. One cannot 'choose' to engage aesthetically with an air raid. One is forced into engagement. In Berleant's terms, violence abolishes disinterestedness and makes the witness vulnerable, threatened, and therefore aesthetically *engaged* (Berleant,

2019). The article therefore treats *aesthetics* not as a detached appreciation but as a field capable of addressing involuntary, negative, and morally saturated experience.

In a rear city under regular aerial attacks, war is most immediately given not as a front line but as terrorism against civilians through missiles and drones. The attacks vary in intensity by geography and period, but their shared feature is the vulnerability of 'soft targets': residential buildings, hospitals, universities, schools, childcare centres, business hubs, cafés, offices, warehouses, and production spaces. In such conditions, the city is no longer merely a site of dwelling; it becomes a space of constant negotiation between survival and continuity. The dominant sensory channel of this negotiation is sound. War arrives as sirens, engine whine, air defence fire, detonations, the falling clatter of debris, and the occasional frightening silence between these events.

A major part of wartime experience occurs before anything happens: anticipation. The expectation of an attack becomes a background mode of being. Over time, one learns that the question is not *if* but *when*. This transforms domestic space into a field of strategic thinking. Gradually, it becomes ordinary to think: a drone or a fragment might hit *this* building, *this* entrance, *this* apartment. In that scenario, there will be explosion, fire, and potential loss of home. Even if the hit is elsewhere in the building, windows may shatter; shards become a danger to sleeping bodies. Thus the apartment is re-evaluated not as a stable 'home' but as a set of zones with different probabilities of harm.

People learn the rule of 'two walls': interior spaces protected by two or more walls (bathrooms, closets, corridors near elevator shafts) are considered safer from shrapnel. Yet everyone also knows the cruel limit: in direct impact, no wall 'protects'. This knowledge produces a peculiar domestic logic: one simultaneously prepares and recognises the futility of preparation. The apartment becomes both refuge and potential trap.

From this domestic logic emerges a set of micro-rituals of survival. Bedtime is preceded by assembling 'transition kits' (documents, medicine, water, snacks, warm clothes), choosing sleeping locations away from windows, preparing routes to shelters, and constructing interior niches as improvised protective spaces. These practices form an emergent aesthetics of care and endurance, where mundane gestures acquire existential intentionality. Crucially, the micro-ritual is not only practical; it is perceptual and affective. Laying out a backpack by the door, placing a child's shoes in reach, moving a mattress to the hallway – these are gestures that reorganise the meaning of objects. They become charged: not objects of comfort, but instruments of continuity. Here, 'everyday aesthetics' shifts from taste to maintenance of life.

A clarification is needed, however, about what makes these practices specifically aesthetic rather than merely engaged or habitual. Engagement, as Berleant uses the term, describes the continuity between subject and environment – the absence of detached, disinterested spectatorship.

But engagement alone does not define the aesthetic: one can be fully continuous with one's environment in a purely functional, automatic, or rule-governed way without any aesthetic dimension arising. What distinguishes aesthetic engagement from mere environmental immersion is a quality that several theorists of everyday aesthetics have tried to articulate in different ways. Saito, drawing on Dewey, emphasises the unity and completeness of perceptual experience – the moment when an activity becomes an *experience* in Dewey's full sense: internally organised, felt as a whole, and distinguished from the mere passage of events (Dewey, 1934). Berleant himself, in his later work, speaks of the intensity and quality of perceptual involvement – not quantity of contact but a particular mode of attentiveness. What both accounts share, and what the wartime practices described in this article exemplify, is a further feature: their irreducible situatedness and non-rule-governed character. Assembling a transition kit is not aesthetic because it is expressive or beautiful, but because it cannot be performed by rote. Each time, it requires a fresh assessment of what this particular situation demands. The practice unfolds in response to the specific, the contingent, the unrepeatable. And it is precisely this improvisatory, situation-responsive quality – the creative attentiveness demanded by conditions that never repeat themselves exactly – that grounds the aesthetic character of wartime care practices.

In many Ukrainian cities, there are limited purpose-built bomb shelters. Metro stations and dedicated underground shelters exist but are unevenly accessible. Often, people use underground parking garages in newer buildings or basements in older housing stock. These spaces are re-made by residents. Over time, shelter interiors accumulate furniture brought from apartments – folding chairs, camping tables, blankets – and infrastructure such as Wi-Fi. In some cases, families bring sofas so that parents with small children can sleep.

It is a form of domesticisation of an emergency space – and, more precisely, an aesthetic act in a specific rather than merely broad sense. What is at stake is not spatial organisation in the abstract but a particular kind of sensory and affective transformation. The underground parking garage, with its smell of concrete and petrol, its harsh fluorescent light and acoustics of dripping water and car alarms, is an environment that assaults perception. It modifies what Berleant calls the aesthetic field – the quality of perceptual engagement available to those who inhabit the space (Berleant, 2009). A shelter furnished for human duration alters the temporal and sensory experience of waiting: it permits conversation, rest, and a form of sociality that is incompatible with bare concrete. In Saito's terms, the transformation of a shelter into a provisional home is an act of aesthetic care – it shapes the quality of embodied inhabitation and the nature of perceptual engagement with a shared environment (Saito, 2022, p. 141).

Yet the most difficult moment is often not the time inside the shelter but the threshold: the decision to leave the apartment, to wake a child, to move through stairwells and elevators that may fail during blackout. The shelter is safer, but the act of getting there is a negotiation with exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty. This threshold experience is a key component of the *old abnormal*:

the repeated crossing between private interior and emergency interior, night after night, year after year.

If your building is not hit that night, the attack is primarily lived as auditory experience. Sirens may or may not be heeded; the decisive sounds are closer: air defence fire, the buzzing approach of drones, the explosive booms of interception or impact, and the after-sounds – debris falling on roofs, car alarms, human voices. The affective structure of these sounds is contradictory. A boom triggers instinctive flinch and fear; yet if the boom signals that air defence has destroyed a drone, it may also bring relief, even joy. The same sound is simultaneously terror and salvation. This ambivalence is part of the aesthetic complexity of wartime hearing: perception is saturated with interpretation. You do not merely hear; you listen diagnostically. You try to decide what kind of sound it is, where it is, whether it is approaching, whether it is 'above us.' The auditory field becomes a cognitive map.

The next day, even if one managed to sleep in a shelter, the sleep is usually shallow and interrupted. Yet 'normal' weekday life resumes: morning hygiene, children to school or kindergarten (where staff are already present), commuting, working, supporting others. This routine is conducted under chronic fatigue that accumulates into exhaustion and decreased productivity.

The morning is also saturated with news: which buildings were hit, who was killed or injured (how many adults, how many children), what infrastructure was damaged, whether electricity and water will be cut. Blackouts and outages become unpredictable and therefore must be incorporated into daily planning: one continues living, caring, working, speaking about 'ordinary' problems, even when light and water disappear.

This is where the spectacle model collapses most clearly. There is no 'viewing' position. One becomes, in effect, an uncredited participant in a scene that could later become a film. Yet the participation is not chosen; it is imposed. The civilian is not an audience; the civilian is a vulnerable body inside the event. This collapse has a direct bearing on Sontag's warning that the 'we' of spectatorship masks asymmetries of safety and distance. In the Ukrainian rear city under sustained bombardment, this distinction breaks down from within: the same person who is the vulnerable body inside the event will, by morning, encounter its documentation on a screen, become, briefly, a spectator of their own night. The asymmetry Sontag diagnoses does not disappear – it is reproduced, but now internally, within a single subject oscillating between the two positions. It is precisely this oscillation – between being inside the spectacle and seeing oneself inside it – that existing aesthetic frameworks for terror, built around the figure of the distant observer, are unable to account for. The discussion that follows examines those frameworks and their limits.

2. Terror in Aesthetic Theory: The Dominance of the Spectacle Paradigm

To understand how the everyday experience of wartime Ukraine is translated 'for the world,' it is instructive to look closely at recent journalistic reports, both international and Ukrainian. These texts do not merely transmit

information; they actively produce a regime of meaning – a way in which war becomes legible, measurable, and communicable to distant audiences. At the same time, they reveal the structural tension between testimony and objectification.

A recent international investigative report opens with the refusal of quiet as a category of wartime life: “This summer, there were no quiet nights” (Johnson et al., 2025). What follows is a movement from the lived night into the language of scale: numbers of drones and missiles, the tally of dead and injured, the intensification of bombardment. The account culminates in a formulation that returns to the body and the senses: “To endure a night of war is to be assaulted by noise” (Johnson et al., 2025).

A second passage from the same report deepens this sensory ontology through rhythm and sound imagery: “Death in Ukraine lurks between sounds. Echoing in the hush between the thunderclap of exploding drones. Spiking in the seconds after a ballistic missile’s boom. Plinking like debris falling against a roof” (Johnson et al., 2025).

Here, sound is no longer simply described; it is performed in language. The sentence structure mimics the experience of waiting, of listening, of anticipating the next impact. Death is not located in a single explosion but in the intervals between them – in the suspended time of acoustic uncertainty. The article thus captures something essential about contemporary Ukrainian civilian life: the war is not only what happens; it is what might happen again in the next few seconds.

A Ukrainian report describes the same phenomenon through a different discursive lens. It emphasises long-term psychological inscription and collective memory:

The sounds of explosions and gunfire, the constant wailing of sirens and air-raid alerts have become everyday life for Ukrainians [...] This traumatic experience, deeply buried in the subconscious, will never disappear. It will be rooted in the collective memory of the Ukrainian people for at least several generations. This is the consequence of acoustic terror. (Khut, 2024)

There is no reason to doubt the empirical truth of this statement. And yet its language is unmistakably clinical. *Traumatic experience, subconscious, acoustic terror* resemble the vocabulary of a medical file or a psychological diagnosis. In such a framework, the civilian becomes implicitly a patient, and society becomes a damaged organism to be assessed. This tension between testimony and objectification becomes even more pronounced when we turn to academic literature on terror and terrorism.

Some authors, echoing Theodor Adorno’s post-Auschwitz provocation, question whether any *aesthetic* can be entertained after witnessing terror first-hand (Senoussi, 2018, p. 33). Others argue that ‘successful’ terrorist acts offer an aesthetic experience structurally comparable to artworks because they are products of and in a medium, resembling performance or cinema (Battisti, 2022). Still others insist that terrorism is *designed to look* theatrical, even if it is not theatre: orchestrated violence intended to destabilise an audience (Battersby, 2013).

These debates are instructive but often hover at the level of analogy – terrorism as performance, terror as art-like – and thus risk granting terrorists the aesthetic agency they seek. They also raise an ethical problem: if the terror ‘impresses’ aesthetically, does that imply admiration? Emmanouil Aretoulakis (2008) attempts to resolve this by arguing that appreciation of beauty – even in the case of 9/11 – may be necessary to establish an ethical stance toward terror, life, and art. The argument suggests that aesthetic power can be ethically mobilised. Yet it remains tied to the spectator’s position: it is about how terror appears and affects those who behold it.

A revealing example is the discussion of Thomas Hoepker’s photograph taken on 11 September 2001 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, showing people relaxed in sunlight while smoke rises across the river. Samuel Weber (2013, p. 29) notes that the image’s power lies in the nonchalance it depicts at the moment when the grounds supporting that attitude are literally being consumed in the background. The moral shock emerges from contrast: leisure and catastrophe in one frame.

Hoepker’s photograph also recalls Martha Rosler’s photomontage series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), in which images of war enter the domestic idyll of American interiors, exposing the mediated intimacy of distant violence. Rosler’s gesture is critical: she shows that war is already ‘in’ the home via television and newspapers, and she makes that intrusion literal. In Ukraine, however, the montage becomes reality. The war does not enter the home as image alone; it enters as blast waves, shattered windows, boarded facades, and sleep in hallways away from glass. The domestic interior is not merely a site of mediated viewing; it is a site of direct vulnerability. Rosler’s critique thus helps identify a shift: from the aesthetics of mediated intrusion to the aesthetics of material and sensory invasion.

One of the most helpful conceptual moves for this problem comes from Robert Appelbaum (2019, p. 5), who argues that what we talk about when we talk about terrorism unfolds in several temporal modes: something that happened, has happened, is happening, or simply happens. Classic communications models treat an event as a discrete occurrence followed by media reaction, but Appelbaum insists that terrorism discourse operates through shifting temporalities that structure how we inhabit the event imaginatively.

Appelbaum also warns that popular culture often renders terrorism as something that “just happens,” with vague past and irrelevant future – an entertainment modality that can take viewers “hostage” (Appelbaum, 2019, p. 15). Wartime Ukraine exposes the ethical gap between that entertainment temporality and lived temporality. Here terrorism is not a plot device; it is a recurring condition that reorganises life.

It is at this point that the concept of the sublime enters the discussion. Historically, the sublime has been the category through which aesthetic theory has tried to make sense of experiences that combine fear, awe, and attraction. In the eighteenth century, it was linked to the power of reason confronting overwhelming nature. In the twenty-first century, it is often mobilised to

account for the strange allure of catastrophe and terror in mass-mediated culture.

Some scholars explain our fascination with horror and terror by pointing to what Noël Carroll and Carolyn Korsmeyer describe as the *paradox of aversion*: people are drawn to experiences that deliver unpleasantness and even pain, combining curiosity, disgust, and a strange form of pleasure (Stern, 2013; Pascale, 2016). The sublime, in this sense, becomes a way of legitimising our attraction to what repels us.

But when applied to real terror, this move becomes ethically dangerous. György Fogarasi has therefore warned that the fashionable linkage between the *aesthetics of the sublime* and terrorism risks emptying both concepts of meaning. Without radically rethinking what the sublime is, invoking notions such as the *negative sublime* in relation to events like the Holocaust may imply – however unintentionally – that scholars experience some form of ‘indirect’ pleasure in contemplating Auschwitz (Fogarasi, 2014). This warning shows that we cannot simply extend the sublime to encompass contemporary terror without confronting the risk of aestheticising what should resist aestheticisation.

Berleant’s earlier work (2009) already identifies this structural tension within the aesthetics of terrorism. He argues that terror, while possessing dramatic force and staged theatricality, simultaneously overwhelms the boundaries of objectivity: its audience is not disinterested but threatened and vulnerable. Crucially, Berleant distinguishes between disinterested appreciation – which aestheticises violence and thereby risks condoning it – and engaged appreciation, which confronts violence as aesthetically negative and morally intolerable. In the Ukrainian case, this distinction is not merely theoretical: it describes two actually available modes of reception. On one side stands the mediated spectatorship available to international audiences, for whom Ukrainian war arrives as image, data, and narrative. On the other stands the engaged, involuntary participation of civilians whose sensory environment is structured by recurring threat – for whom the distinction between spectator and target has dissolved. The difference between these two positions is not one of degree but of kind, and it is this difference that motivates the shift, in what follows, from spectacle-based models to the negative aesthetics of engagement.

It is at this point that I turn away from spectacle-based models and toward negative aesthetics and engaged perception, which allow us to think about terror not as something we look at, but as something that happens to and through us.

3. The Sublime as a Mode of Aesthetic Experience of Everyday Terror

The preceding sections have operated at two distinct but related levels: the phenomenology of the individual civilian body and domestic interior under aerial attack, and the analysis of how aesthetic theory has conceptualised terror as a cultural and mediated phenomenon. Bringing these levels into

contact requires a conceptual bridge. That bridge is built from three components: Berleant's negative aesthetics, which replaces spectatorship with engagement as the foundational mode of aesthetic experience; Kant's distinction between the sublime and the monstrous, which provides a diagnostic tool for identifying where classical aesthetics reaches its limits under conditions of direct threat; and an account of temporal rather than spatial distance as the condition that makes a modified sublimity possible in sustained wartime. What connects the personal and the theoretical is the collapse of the spectatorial position: in the *old abnormal*, there is no outside to retreat to, no safe distance from which to aestheticise one's own vulnerability.

Much aesthetic writing on terror and terrorism has been shaped by media events and representational forms: 9/11 as the paradigmatic spectacle, cinema's staging of fear, video games' survival mechanics, found footage aesthetics, and the ethics of viewing. For example, discussions of horror and terror in visual culture often focus on how the camera becomes a tool – recording alternative versions of events, revealing what characters cannot otherwise see, or functioning as a weapon (McMurdo, 2017). Such analyses illuminate how contemporary media organise fear.

Many scholars note that 9/11 was intrinsically linked to its instantaneous worldwide televising, affecting people far beyond those directly threatened (Bleiker and Leet, 2006, p. 715). Terrorism, in this view, aims less at destroying physical targets than at destabilising audiences through mediated circulation. This is a crucial insight for understanding modern terror, but it also centres the 'audience' as the primary locus of terror's efficacy. In the Ukrainian case, the audience and the victims overlap: the same people are both the threatened bodies and the consumers of information about the threat. One lives the event and then watches its documentation. The result is a loop: being inside the spectacle, then seeing oneself inside it via media.

The experience differs fundamentally from terror-as-spectacle theories. Civilians in Kyiv do not observe violence from a safe distance; they inhabit its interior. One becomes a participant in an unfolding scene – a future documentary or analysis – in which today's 'extras' enact survival rather than witness representation. Aesthetic distance collapses.

Even when one is not personally hit, the city confronts civilians with spectacular scenes: a building with a black cavity, a torn-off entrance, a street scattered with glass. Like passing a car accident, the gaze sticks – even against one's will. This is not voyeurism in the simple sense; it is an involuntary response to visible catastrophe. Yet here again ethics enters: to look is to risk turning others' disaster into an image, while to look away is to deny shared reality. This tension sits at the heart of wartime aesthetics: the constant negotiation between attention and respect, between witnessing and consumption.

Theoretical frameworks help to clarify why the civilian experience of sustained bombardment in rear cities is so difficult to conceptualise aesthetically. Arnold Berleant's notion of negative aesthetics and the negative sublime describes

situations in which terror overwhelms perceptual capacities and collapses the possibility of detached contemplation; Immanuel Kant's concept of the monstrous, by contrast, identifies experiences that paralyse imagination and compel a primarily moral – rather than aesthetic – response. Contemporary Ukraine often occupies precisely this unstable threshold: a space in which the classical sublime slides into the monstrous, and yet where daily life continues through adaptive routines, practices of care, and a reconfigured mode of inhabiting urban space.

Berleant theorises the possibility of a negative aesthetics – an aesthetics of violence and harm inseparable from an ethics of violence. The key mechanism here is engagement: aesthetic experience is not defined by distance and disinterest but by a continuity between subject and object, in which perception becomes ethically charged. Negative experience is not an exception reserved for extreme events; it is pervasive, though often unrecognised, because it is “commonplace and unremarked” (Berleant, 2019). For Berleant, the crucial danger is not simply that violence appears in art, but that social life normalises violence by turning its presentation into an object of disinterested appreciation. When violence is aesthetically consumed without moral consequence, it becomes socially condoned. When appreciation becomes engaged, however, it can function as a humanising force by bearing “negative testimony to the moral import of aesthetic experience” (Berleant, 2019).

Berleant's formulation is also important because it names the structural ambiguity of terrorism as an aesthetic object. Terror has dramatic force and staged theatricality; thus one can speak of an ‘aesthetics of terrorism.’ Yet precisely through its aesthetic impact, terror overwhelms the boundaries of objectivity; its audience is not disinterested but threatened and vulnerable (Berleant, 2019). Disinterested appreciation aestheticises violence and thereby risks condoning it; engaged appreciation confronts violence as aesthetically negative and morally intolerable, making aesthetic experience a testimony to its moral significance (Berleant, 2019).

To approach the sublime as an analytic category, it is necessary to return briefly to the canonical modern theorists: Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Burke famously argues that when danger or pain press too near, they produce no delight; they are *simply terrible*. Only “at certain distances, and with certain modifications,” can fear become “delightful,” which is to say, capable of yielding the aesthetic pleasure associated with the sublime (Burke, 1757/2005). This emphasis on distance is crucial for thinking about war as sound.

Burke explicitly highlights sudden and excessive sound as a generator of terror:

Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror [...] The noise of [...] thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind [...] A sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power. (Burke, 1757/2005)

Yet Burke's account still assumes the possibility of an aesthetic transformation: at the right distance, terror can become sublime.

Kant radicalises the issue by distinguishing between what remains within the aesthetic domain and what breaks it. In §26 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he differentiates the colossal – the “almost too large for any exhibition” – from the monstrous, which nullifies the purpose of the concept and overwhelms the faculties (Kant, 1987, p. 253). The pure judgement of the sublime, Kant insists, must have no purpose of the object as its basis; it must remain aesthetic rather than mixed with the judgement of understanding or reason (*Ibid.*).

Building on this, Herman Parret offers a sharp interpretation: the colossal remains within the aesthetics of the sublime, but the monstrous lies beyond it. The monstrous paralyses the mind; it destroys imagination and produces pain so intense that mediation between pain and pleasure becomes impossible. This is the domain of “ultimate ugliness,” whose affective effect is disgust or loathing; here, no aesthetic relation is possible, only a moral attitude (Parret, 2016, p. 14). In Parret’s reading, ugliness is not simply the opposite of beauty; it stands “on the other side” of the sublime, beyond the grasp of representational faculties (*Ibid.*).

These distinctions become analytically urgent in the context of repeated aerial terror. The phenomenology of attacks in a rear city resembles Burke’s catalogue of sudden and overwhelming sounds – artillery-like bursts, detonations, concussive waves – yet the distance required for sublimity is missing. Often the explosion is not literally “above you,” but the sound wave is so powerful that it produces an effect akin to Kant’s monstrous: the mind is stunned, the imagination cannot “frame” the event, and the immediate reaction is axiological – fear, disgust, moral protest. In other words, Kantian sublimity is structurally unavailable at the moment of attack: it is too close, too engulfing, too large to be comprehended “within one whole” (Kant, 1987, p. 253). This is why the Kantian model – so effective for thinking about the sublime in nature, and later for thinking about the sublime in art – becomes problematic when applied to the lived reality of recurring terror.

For this reason, the concept that offers the most promise for my analysis is Berleant’s negative sublime, rooted in social aesthetics and an aesthetics of engagement. He notes that Kant’s dynamical sublime requires that we feel secure and unthreatened, able to rise above fear rather than be subject to it. Even war, Kant suggests, can contain something sublime if conducted with order and respect for citizens’ rights – presumably by protecting non-combatants. In terrorism, by contrast, sublimity appears in the intensity of physical force and engulfing emotional power, in the overwhelming psychological pressure of the situation (*Ibid.*). The Ukrainian war collapses the Kantian condition even more radically: civilians are not protected; they are repeatedly targeted. The rear becomes a battlefield. The ‘spectator’ position erodes.

At the same time, Berleant’s later work (2019) becomes especially valuable because it opens space for describing the aesthetic character of witness experience. The aesthetics of violence, by the standard of engaged experience,

is unqualifiedly negative – appalling, emotionally distressing, morally repugnant; it is a direct encounter with negativity (Berleant, 2019, p. 9). While perpetrators may be disinterested and victims abstract in the logic of terror, the experience of the witness is personal and compelling – an engaged aesthetic (*Ibid.*). And because disinterested appreciation condones violence by aestheticising it, engaged aesthetic appreciation can become a humanising force by confronting aesthetic negativity and testifying to the moral significance of aesthetic experience (*Ibid.*).

This is the bridge I need: a way to theorise my own experience (and the experience of other civilians) without turning terror into spectacle. The aim of this article is not to find pleasure in horror, nor to redeem violence through aesthetic categories, but to analyse a lived condition in which sensory experience, domestic space, and urban routines are restructured by recurring threat – and to use that analysis as an entry point into ethical theorising. If the experience is left only in the registers of trauma, pathology, and statistics, it remains objectified. An engaged negative aesthetics, by contrast, allows the experience to be articulated as meaningful without being beautified.

A remaining difficulty, however, is that Berleant's negative sublime often presumes either spectatorship or a single extraordinary event. The Ukrainian condition is not a one-time spectacle but an accumulated temporality of recurrence: terror enters everyday life repeatedly and predictably enough to become routine, yet never predictably enough to become safe. This is why concepts such as the 'mundane sublime' and typologies of terror aesthetics become relevant.

Jenifer Presto (2011) identifies what he calls a *decadent sublime* in Alexander Blok's aestheticisation of catastrophe and terror. Steven Cresap (1990, p. 111), earlier, introduced the *mundane sublime* to describe "how we use the value of the sublime to deal with a world in which the destruction of cities is no longer a remote possibility". This formulation resonates strongly with contemporary Ukraine, where urban destruction is not a distant scenario but an experienced condition of possibility – one that shapes daily planning, bodily tension, and the temporal structure of nights and mornings.

Marshall Battani and Michaelyn Mankel attempt to extend Berleant's (2017) negative sublime precisely in this direction, proposing a typology that includes the negative sublime but adds two aesthetic types: the corporeal and the quotidian. They note that the juxtaposition of everyday images with captions that redefine them as terror casts terror and everyday life into supporting roles; terrorism begins to operate like what Berleant (2009, cited in Battani and Mankel, 2017) called "a vicious lottery with equal opportunity to lose," highlighting the circumstantial and oblivious nature of victimisation – especially apt for quotidian terror directed at "soft targets". Crucially, they argue that aesthetic appreciation is key to constructing a thoroughly ethical stance toward terror because it engages all faculties while privileging none; ideal types built from socio-technical moments offer a sociologically informed framework for such engagement (Battani and Mankel, 2017).

The question, then, remains: can the prolonged, repeated experience of urban terror be understood through the lens of a negative sublime that has become quotidian – an everyday sublimity without spatial distance? One possibility – advanced here as a conceptual hypothesis rather than a definitive claim, and necessarily conditioned by the particularity of the position from which it is offered – is that what makes a modified sublimity available in sustained wartime is not spatial but temporal distance. This hypothesis may be generalisable beyond the individual case: wherever a civilian population endures prolonged, recurring aerial terror rather than a single spectacular attack, the phenomenological structure of the experience shifts from the instantaneous to the durational, from shock to endurance. In this durational structure, the relevant aesthetic transformation does not occur in the moment of attack – which tends toward the monstrous, in Kant’s precise sense, overwhelming the faculties without permitting mediation – but in the aftermath: in the experience of having survived, of the body’s continued presence in a world it might have left. This is not pleasure in violence, nor redemption of suffering through aesthetic categories; it is, rather, a minimal, ethically charged affirmation of continued existence. Whether this constitutes sublimity in a philosophically rigorous sense remains genuinely open. What can be claimed is that it constitutes a distinct aesthetic mode – one that resists both the spectacular framing of terror and the denial of any aesthetic dimension to wartime experience altogether.

A second scenario complicates the picture: witnessing the aftermath of catastrophe elsewhere in the city. When one sees, with one’s own eyes, a building torn open by impact – a black cavity in a residential block, debris scattered, volunteers assisting residents – the scene becomes a ‘spectacle’ in a literal sense. But the witness position is ethically unstable: it can reproduce the voyeuristic logic that Sontag warns against. The question is whether this witnessing can be framed not as consumption of ruins, but as engaged recognition of vulnerability and care.

In November 2025, an impact occurred near my home. The affected building was where Tetiana, the gardener who appears in my earlier article *The vernacular Garden during the War: Heterotopia, Space of Care and Relational Symbol of Non-Violent Resilience* (Butsykina, 2023), lives. When I asked how she was, she said the drone struck the neighbouring entrance: her apartment remained standing, but windows were shattered, and she spent the morning collecting glass. When I asked about her garden, she said it was intact – yet she feared emergency services might throw burned remains onto the young trees she had recently planted. Does this moment contain a place for the sublime – negative, mundane, or otherwise? In one sense, it does: the garden’s survival, and her concern for it amid destruction, condenses a refusal of terror’s totalising claim. But when I later crossed the canal and looked back from a distance, seeing the same black cavity in the building, I did not feel sublimity at all – despite occupying the Kantian ‘correct’ position of distance and visual totality. War and its consequences do not inherently carry sublimity; they cannot yield aesthetic pleasure, even transformed of suffering

and fear. If anything, what approaches sublimity here lies not in destruction but in its inverse: the persistence of inhabitation, care, repair, and the stubborn continuation of a shared world.



Image 1. View of the building hit by a Shahed drone during the night. Kyiv. November 2025

4. Aesthetic Engagement and Care for Dwelling Space as an Anti-Sublime

The condition Tina Polek describes as the *new abnormal* – and which, in Ukraine, has solidified into an *old abnormal* – is precisely such a state of prolonged aesthetic harm. The city is no longer a neutral background for everyday life; it becomes acoustically hostile, visually unstable, and temporally unpredictable. And yet, paradoxically, this condition also generates a dense ecology of reparative aesthetic practices.

These practices are visible across Ukrainian cities: volunteer replanting of bombed parks, painting of checkpoints and barricades, spontaneous war memorials, taped windows, sandbags, plywood facades, and makeshift shelters. None of these are designed as artworks, yet all function aesthetically in Berleant's sense: they reorganise perception, reconfigure space, and reclaim agency within damaged environments. They are acts of aesthetic resistance – not in the sense of symbolic protest but in the sense of sustaining a living world against its systematic destruction. This sensory recalibration is inseparable from practices of care. When shattered windows are immediately covered with plywood, this is not only pragmatic protection but an aesthetic and ethical gesture in Yuriko Saito's sense – an everyday aesthetics of maintenance, repair, and resilience (Saito, 2022).

In Saito's framework, such acts should not be dismissed as merely functional. They are aesthetic precisely because they shape how we live with things, how we attend to them, and how they invite us into relationships of care. Even when an object is "ready-to-hand," actively engaging with it also brings it into the mode of "present-at-hand," allowing it to be experienced not only as a tool but as a participant in a shared world (Saito, 2022, p. 141). Taped windows, boarded doors, or improvised shelters thus become aesthetic objects of

necessity. They invite engagement not as beautiful designs but as signs of shared vulnerability and mutual responsibility.

This relational understanding of the aesthetic becomes even more powerful when read alongside Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of domestic space. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard writes: "For our house is our corner of the world [...] it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 4). Home, in this sense, is not just a physical structure but a cosmological orientation – a way in which the self is anchored in the world.

War radically destabilises this cosmology. In my own case, the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 displaced me from my first home in Luhansk, which now exists only in memory – and not in a nostalgic register, but as a traumatic and politically contaminated space. Yet even in this condition of forced displacement, dwelling does not disappear. What emerges instead is a transformed mode of Heideggerian *Wohnen* – a way of inhabiting space under threat that intensifies attachment rather than dissolving it.

Bachelard's insight that "every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide [...] is a symbol of solitude for the imagination" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 136) takes on new meaning here. Under aerial terror, corners and inner rooms are no longer merely poetic refuges; they become strategic zones of survival. Bathrooms, corridors, and closets – spaces protected by two or more walls – are re-purposed into sleeping areas. Mattresses, blankets, and pillows migrate from bedrooms into improvised shelters. Underground parking garages and basements are transformed into nocturnal living rooms, furnished with folding chairs, camp beds, Wi-Fi routers, children's toys, and thermoses of tea.

These spaces accumulate objects of care: water, snacks, power banks, shared blankets. Neighbours place bottles of water and sweets in elevators in case someone is trapped during a power outage caused by an attack on energy infrastructure. These gestures are small, but they create a dense network of mutual attunement. They are aesthetic in the deepest sense: they materialise interdependence.

This is where the anti-sublime emerges. The black cavity in a bombed building does not produce sublimity; it produces shock, grief, and moral outrage. But the garden that persists beside it, the plywood that seals a shattered window, the blanket offered in a shelter – these enact a form of everyday negative sublimity. They do not overwhelm the senses; they resist being overwhelmed. They testify to what Berleant calls an engaged aesthetic: an experience that is emotionally distressing and morally charged, yet capable of sustaining meaning (Berleant, 2019).

Saito's philosophy makes this explicit. Active engagement with material objects allows us to experience them not as anonymous instruments but as partners in a shared history:

We continue the object's history through its own aging process and our interaction with it [...] It is no longer the anonymous other simply serving my needs but something that grows together with me and shares a life and history with me. (Saito, 2022, p. 142)

This is precisely what happens to wartime domestic objects – windows, doors, walls, gardens, shelters. They are scarred, repaired, reinforced, and revisited, becoming witnesses to survival.

Through such aesthetic engagement, Saito argues, we develop a care relationship with the material world and “reclaim and celebrate our interdependence with the world around us” (Saito, 2022, p. 164). In Ukrainian cities under bombardment, this interdependence becomes existential. The anti-sublime is not found in the spectacle of destruction but in the fragile, stubborn, and ethically charged persistence of inhabitation.

This dynamic – the emergence of an anti-sublime from the intersection of recurring threat and the refusal of its totalising claim – is not unique to Ukraine, though it takes a particular and historically specific form there. Wherever civilian populations inhabit the interior of prolonged conflict rather than its mediated exterior, the aesthetic categories developed for spectators require replacement by categories adequate to participants. The anti-sublime is one such category: it names not a redemptive transformation of violence but the aesthetic texture of survival itself – the quality of attention, care, and dwelling that persists under conditions designed to make persistence impossible.

5. Conclusions

This article has argued that the experience of prolonged Russian aerial terror in Ukrainian rear cities constitutes a distinct aesthetic condition that cannot be captured by the dominant paradigm of terror as spectacle. The shift from the *new normal* to what Tina Polek calls the *new abnormal* – and what has now become an *old abnormal* – marks the stabilisation of rupture itself as everyday life. In this condition, danger, uncertainty, and acoustic violence do not interrupt the ordinary; they structure it.

Classical theories of the sublime, grounded in distance and spectatorship, fail to account for this situation. As Burke and Kant already implied, terror becomes aesthetically meaningful only when it is not too close. In contemporary Ukraine, however, missile and drone attacks are experienced at a bodily and spatial proximity that collapses the possibility of sublimity and pushes experience toward the monstrous. Terror is not contemplated; it is endured.

Arnold Berleant's concept of negative aesthetics offers a more adequate framework. By replacing disinterested contemplation with aesthetic engagement, Berleant allows us to understand terror as an aesthetic phenomenon without aestheticising violence. In this perspective, the experience of bombardment is aesthetically negative – distressing, repugnant, and morally charged – yet still meaningful because it is lived and interpreted from within.

However, Ukrainian wartime life also exceeds the logic of the single spectacular event. Drawing on notions of the mundane and quotidian sublime, this article has shown how repeated terror becomes embedded in daily routines, spatial practices, and care relations. The aesthetic force of this condition does not lie in destruction itself, but in the fragile persistence of dwelling: boarded windows, shared shelters, gardens, and everyday acts of repair.

These practices constitute what this article has called an anti-sublime – an aesthetic of resilience that resists both spectacular terror and detached contemplation. In continuing to inhabit, care for, and repair damaged spaces, civilians produce a form of everyday aesthetic and ethical resistance that cannot be captured by frameworks predicated on distance, spectatorship, or the single catastrophic event. The argument advanced here is necessarily situated: it emerges from a specific position, a specific city, a specific duration of war. But its implications extend beyond that position. Wherever the distinction between spectator and target collapses – wherever terror becomes not an event to be witnessed but a condition to be endured – aesthetic theory requires not merely extension but reconstitution. The anti-sublime is one step in that reconstitution: under conditions designed to erase a shared world, the fragile persistence of inhabitation becomes the most meaningful aesthetic act of all.

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