

Session at ASESC (online, 29 Mar 25)

55th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, online, 29th March 2025, 12:30–2pm ET

SpS: The Art of Balance:

Concepts of Equality and Democracy in Art and Visual Culture of the long 18th Century [ID 78]

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Max 20 for presentations

In Western politics and philosophy of the 18th century, concepts of balance, equality, and democracy experienced a groundbreaking contouring that continues to have an impact until today (see McMahon 2023). These issues were negotiated not least in the arts. Our thesis is that the parallelism and simultaneity of opposing views and ideologies led to a striving for equilibrium and harmony, and was articulated, for example, within the ideas of social justice and political equality, or the goal of levelling extreme economic and financial differences, an idealistic balance that ultimately paved the way for new concepts of societal order, respectively democracy.

There is no glossing over the fact that a certain degree of difference and hierarchy to guarantee the aesthetically “harmonic” order and balance was a persistent and prevailing ideal of the 18th century. Just as much, while aspiring for a newly balanced order within society, the dynamics of the socio-cultural developments of this period kept contributing to ongoing social injustices such as slavery or gender inequality. We decisively want include and discuss problematic strategies of appropriation and hegemonic agency and their paradoxical agenda in the names of equalization, modulation, normality, or assimilation, as well as non-Western concepts of equilibrium and collectivity. Our goal is to enter a fruitful debate and to develop a critical methodological approach, when we ask in which ways and to which ends the visual arts and their discourses helped to shape and spread the understanding of balance, equality, and democracy in the long 18th century.

More information: <https://asecs.org/meetings/asecs-2025-annual-meeting/>

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Between Truth and Artifice: Reflections on the Balance of "vraisemblance" in 18th-Century Pastoral Painting

The question of *vraisemblance* (verisimilitude) lies at the heart of literary and pictorial theory on the subject of the pastoral, particularly in France. Inspired by the advent of Antoine Watteau's *fêtes galantes* at the beginning of the 18th century, followed by Nicolas Lancret, François Boucher reinvented a mode of depicting rural scenes that was thematically in continuity with the traditional pastoral genre as established since ancient and modern poetry. With a deliberately artificial style, he breaks with earlier pictorial representations, as the most archetypal form of which can certainly be found in Nicolas Poussin's painting. This paper will look beyond the nature/artifice duality inherent in the pastoral to consider the notion of verisimilitude in this genre as a modality essential to the constitution of the pastoral genre.

In 18th century aesthetic theory, the modality of verisimilitude is almost always conceived and theorized through the metaphor of the balance and equilibrium. Truth and imagination must be weighed, measured, nuanced and balanced in order to produce the best possible eclogue or pastoral. Bernard Le Bouyer de Fontenelle speaks of a "medium to be held" and a "certain point", without ever giving a concrete definition or illustrated example of this balance. David Hume, on the other hand, in his *Essais esthétiques*, speaks of "a just mixture". Finally, Jean-Baptiste Dubos proposes to "counterbalance the elevation of Heroic Landscapes" by "throwing into rural landscapes, not only a great character of truth, but also some piquant, extraordinary & plausible effect of Nature".

In this paper, which is intended to be epistemologically critical, we will examine the metaphor of the balance by raising the question of verisimilitude in pastoral painting.

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The Sublime, Natural Disasters, and an Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics of Risk Management

Encountering hurricanes and volcanoes was not unique to the eighteenth century. However, representations of destruction became widespread as period garden designs, paintings, and novels featured both natural disasters and their aftermaths. The surge of artistic interest in catastrophe intersected with the growth of real bodies, ideas, and things exposed to such tragedies through their increased circulation—coerced or voluntary—around the Atlantic. In landscape designs, literature, and paintings, images of disaster and their aftermaths brought the specter of calamity into everyday existence. My dissertation on the subject seeks to answer the question: Why did people exposed to the vulnerabilities of the Atlantic world create, purchase, and enjoy representations of the destructive forces that could end their life or fortunes?

Period philosophers—including famously Burke and Kant—developed ideas of the Sublime as a means of describing pleasure within terrifying experiences, typically in nature. This paper will specifically examine how representations of imagined natural disasters in art, novels, and gardens both create and draw from Sublime aesthetics. Paintings by Claude-Joseph Vernet, novels by Charles Brockden Brown, or the gardens at Hawkstone Park draw the viewer close to disaster and show how disaster can destroy lives. At the same time, by virtue of their media and their composition, these kinds of paintings, novels, and gardens show how to navigate the Sublime experience of disasters to safety and possibly profit, financial and aesthetic. I argue that the Sublime as an aesthetic discourse functioned as a form of risk management adjacent to colonial financial and legal mechanisms such as insurance or joint-stock companies.

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"Genius," Harmony, and Equilibrium in Carl von Clausewitz's "On War"

Carl von Clausewitz's treatise "On War" (Vom Kriege) was published posthumously in 1832. Rationalizing war in Clausewitz's treatise seemed to go hand in hand with "aestheticizing" war. While it seems that Clausewitz is applying the tools of science to warfare in speaking of "friction," equilibrium, balance, and momentum, he also makes extensive use of a specifically aesthetic vocabulary for describing the intuition and indeed the "genius" required of a military commander. This line of thinking is ultimately the source of Clausewitz's assertion that war is an "art" and not a science, preoccupied not so much with laws, but with evaluating one's chances, taking stock of one's past experiences, and developing one's intuition. Predictably, Clausewitz's way of speaking about the "art of war" is therefore deeply shaped by German philosophy and aesthetics from the end of the eighteenth century and the Romantic era. And he explicitly speaks of "balance," "harmony," and "genius."

Building on Anders Endberg-Pederson's work on what he calls the emergence of a "martial aesthetics" around 1800, I'm particularly interested in two aspects of Clausewitz's writing:

- (1) The connection of his work on "balance" and "equilibrium" to an earlier Enlightenment discourse on the "balance of powers." Genius, for Clausewitz, involves finding "balance" on the battlefield between competing forces, having an intuitive sense of being able to predict how one's opponent will react, and being able—in his terms—to "harmonize" the balance of various factors on the battlefield. How does it relate to this older Enlightenment discourse?
- (2) I'm interested in the way that Clausewitz's theory of balance and equilibrium relates to economic theory in the late eighteenth century, including emerging theories of free markets and especially the work of Adam Smith. Clausewitz appears to be interested in the way that balance emerges "on its own" in a strategic context.