

*Romanticism: the founding  
discourse of avant-gardist art*



avant-garde = at the forefront of art, experimental, speculative, ambitious

## THE SOCIAL CONTEXT (late 18c into the 19c)

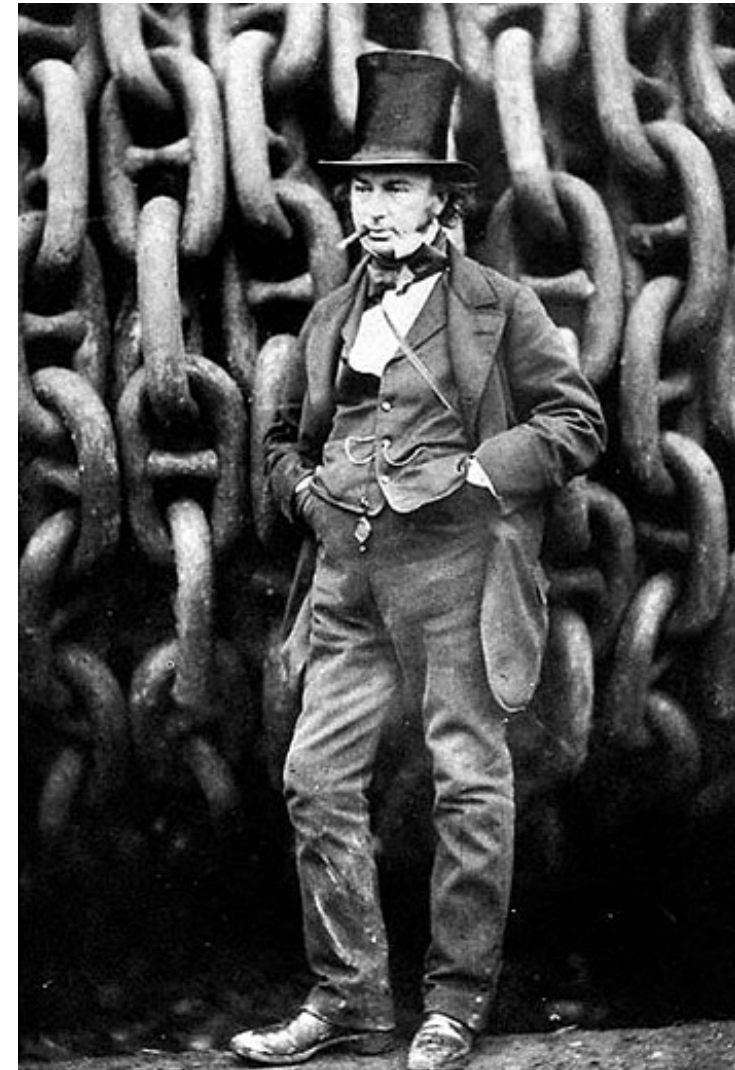
Science and technology have an ever-increasing impact on culture and society

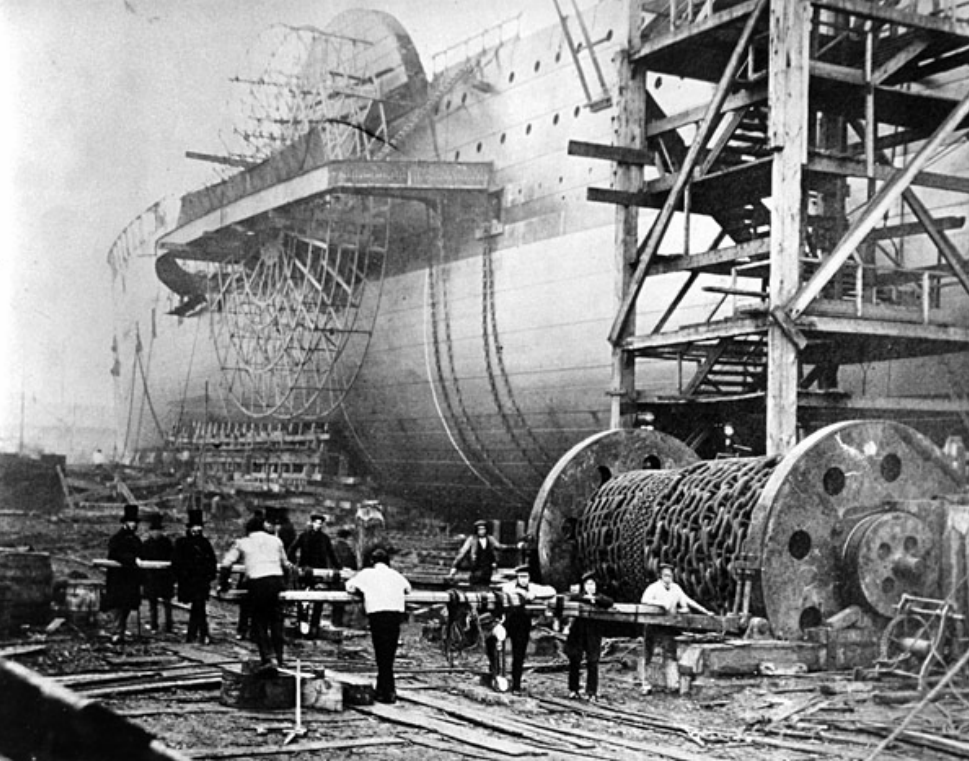
Religion is in decline

The [bourgeoisie](#) (merchant class) are taking command of society away from the aristocracy bringing with them values based on materialism and pragmatism



Isambard K Brunel in front of the chains used to launch the Great Eastern





## Industrial Revolution

late 18c Britain and 19c Europe and America

## Capitalism

### Mechanisation

Urbanisation (movement of people from rural to urban areas, growth of the city)



Chicago 1880s  
the bustling  
metropolis was a  
new phenomenon



Urbanisation was a shock to a culture which had previously been more rural.

William Blake's poem "And did those feet in ancient time"  
1804 made into the hymn Jerusalem with music by C. Hubert  
H. Parry 1916

And did those feet in ancient time,  
Walk upon **England's mountains green**  
And was the holy Lamb of God,  
On **England's pleasant pastures** seen  
And did the Countenance Divine,  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here,  
Among these **dark Satanic Mills**?





In the 17c Newton demystified the heavens. The universe became a machine, conceived as a clockwork-like mechanism. LEFT: William Blake, with some degree of irony, depicts God as Newton the mathematician defining the heavens as a machine. BELOW: a clockwork model of the solar system.





From the second half of the eighteenth century onward religious subject matter in art went into a steep decline

This was due to the collapse of church patronage. The world was changing, it was becoming modern.

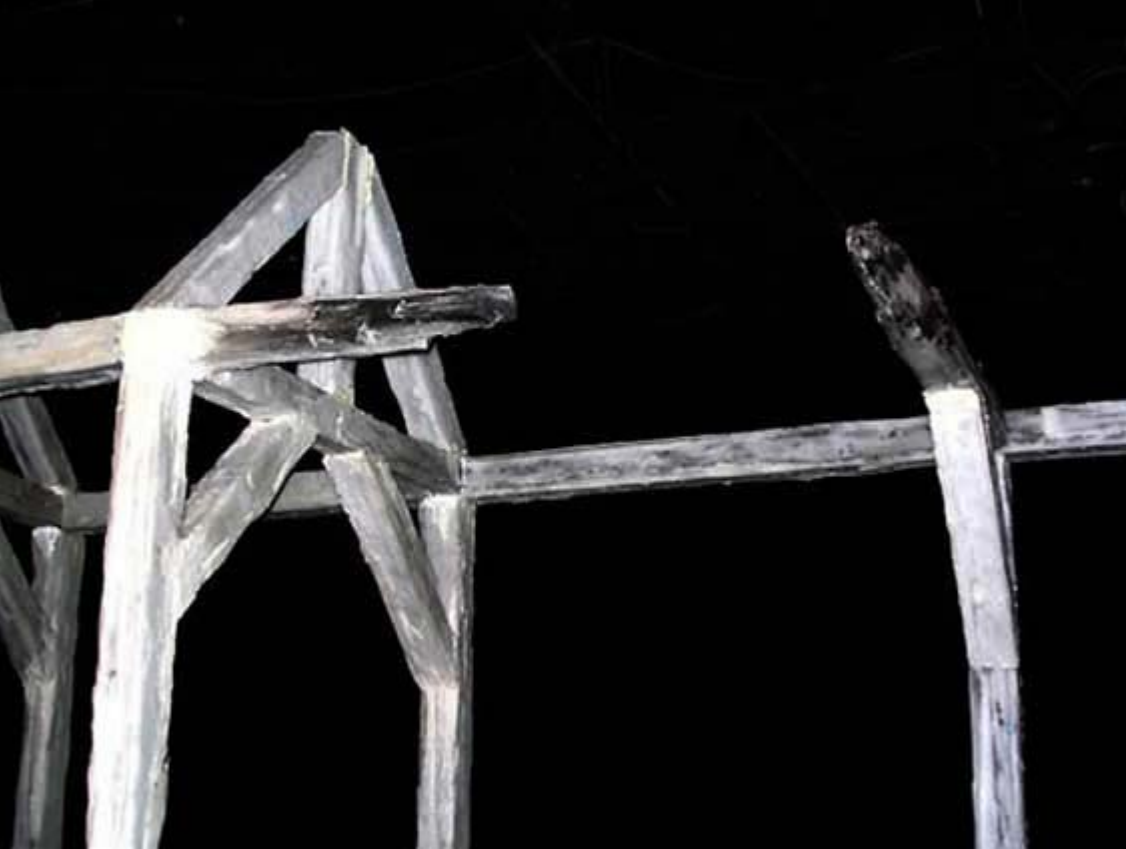
Even **Caspar David Friedrich's** *The Cross in the Mountains*, 1812, (LEFT) seems to reflect the advance of science in its centralised and symmetrical composition, Christ is assimilated into geometry





Caspar David Friedrich Abbey in the Oak Woods, 1810

Caspar David Friedrich's abbey in ruins surrounded by a barren landscape seems metaphorical of the decline of Christianity in the context of the Industrial Revolution



An installation (2005) of a burnt-out church in pitch blackness introduces contemporary Gothic romanticism in the form of New York artist **Banks Violet**. For information go to: <http://artintelligence.net/review/?p=87>





With the death of God human beings are left alone with the blind, mindless, nature that created them.

Romanticism dealt with this predicament by spiritualising nature.

Caspar David Friedrich,  
Wanderer Above the Mist, 1818.



Caspar David Friedrich, Monk by the Sea, 1809-10, Nationalgalerie, Berlin

People are depicted alone contemplating their implication in the forces of nature

## Immanuel Kant, philosopher, (1724-1804)

- The human mind constructs reality
- The “thing-in-itself” (noumenon) is unknowable

When raw sense data enters into the brain from eyes, ears, nose, skin, proprioceptors (bodily position and movement) and nociceptors (pain), the torrent of real-time data is subjected to extremely sophisticated unconscious information-processing that effectively reconstructs not only the external world but also our sense of our own body.

The myriad discrete impulses that flow into the brain become organised and synchronised so that when we see our finger reaching out to touch a solid surface a sensation of solidity and resistance is perfectly synchronised with observation of the position of the finger. All of our sensations of our body and the world around us are ultimately a construct of the brain. What we see, touch and hear is the “screen” where the representation is projected.



## THE SUBLIME

Immauel Kant

**The mind is at first baffled and then experiences a feeling of spiritual rehabilitation and even triumph in the perception of the grand in nature.**

**(Knox 1958: 54)**

**Confronted with the awesome forces of nature we feel the power of nature within ourself**

### REFERENCE

Knox, Israel. 1958. *The aesthetic theories of Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer*. New York: Humanities Press.



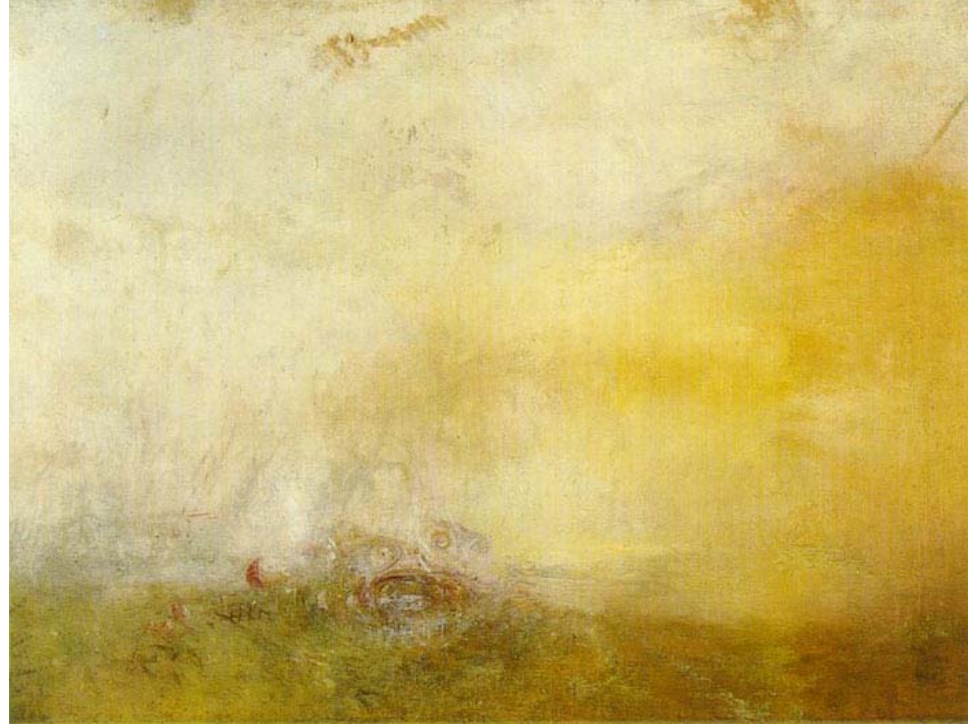
For Kant:

The beautiful accords with Imagination and the Understanding, it is easy and pleasurable on our senses, imagination, and understanding

The beautiful generates a feeling of **peace and harmony**

In contrast the sublime challenges our senses, as well as our imagination and understanding

The sublime is **disquieting**




*purposiveness  
without  
purpose*

Nature has no purpose and yet there is a purposiveness to its creations.


We can note that Darwinian evolution is the most creative process of which we are aware.

According to the Kantian view, nature created the human mind and thereby provided us with intuition whereby we can appreciate both beauty and the sublime.

The background image shows a large, bright, circular light source in a modern, high-ceilinged interior space, possibly a museum or gallery. The light is very bright and creates a strong glow. The architecture features a grid of structural elements. Several people are visible in the foreground and middle ground, some walking and some standing, their silhouettes are dark against the bright light. The overall atmosphere is one of a large, open, and brightly lit public space.

In contemporary theory we do not believe that the appreciation of beauty or the sublime is completely natural or innate. There are, as Kant suggested, very sophisticated processes wired into the brain but they have evolved to be programmed by environmental stimuli.

Cultural knowledge and experience is able to make our aesthetic appreciation more sophisticated than it is in its basic “natural” condition. [Click here](#) and read about the major contemporary artist Olafur Eliasson who believes that our appreciation of nature is determined by our cultural conditioning.

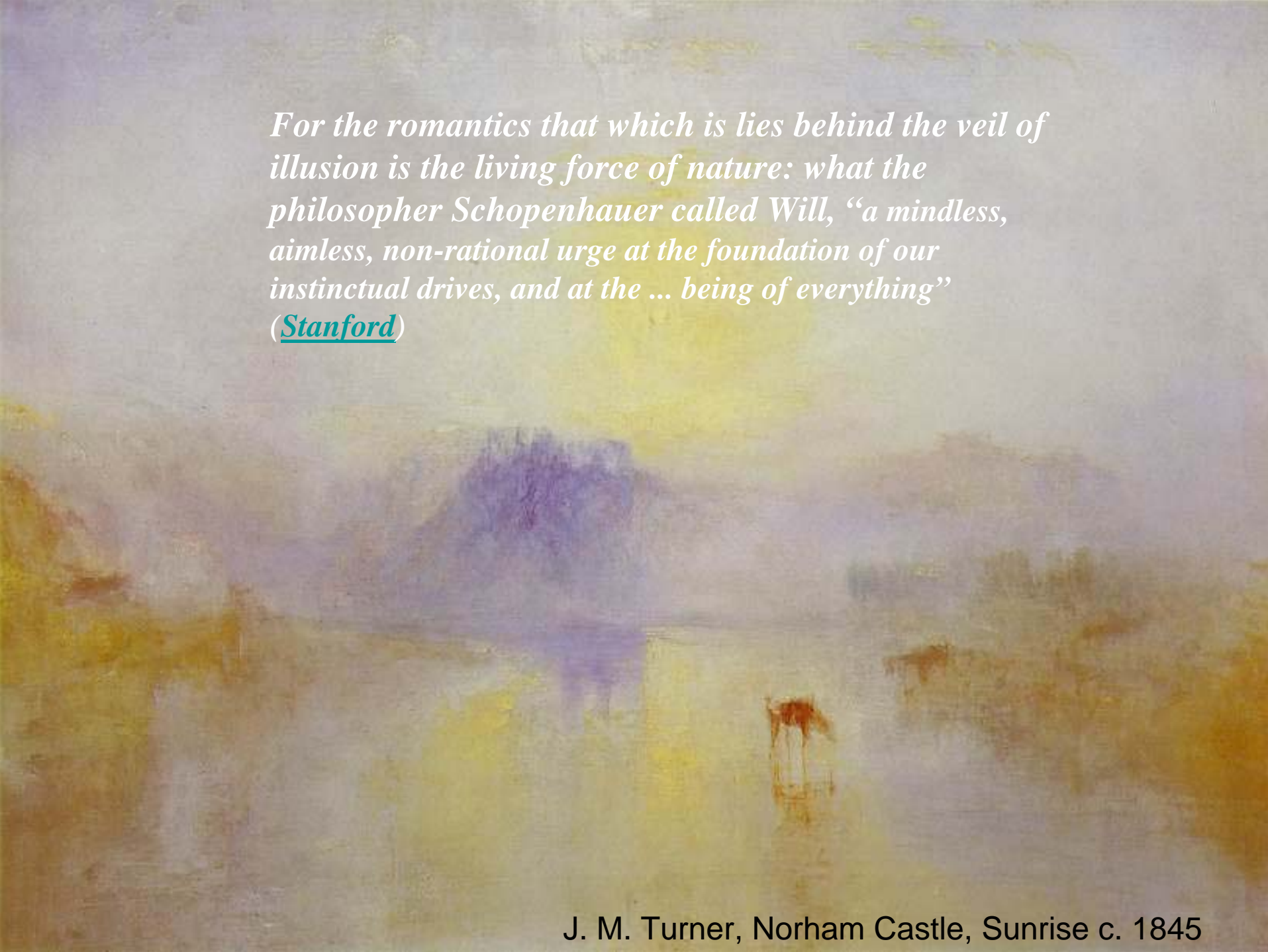
The painting depicts a steam locomotive crossing a railway bridge over a river. The scene is characterized by a hazy, rainy atmosphere with soft, diffused light. The brushwork is visible and expressive, capturing the texture of the rain and steam. The color palette is dominated by warm, muted tones of yellow, brown, and blue, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall composition emphasizes the industrial revolution amidst the elements of nature.

J M Turner, Rain, Steam  
Speed, 1844, what is  
depicted here is an energy  
that, from a romantic point  
of view, can be called  
spiritual in spite of its  
industrial subject matter



Turner, Snow Storm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth.  
Romanticism is attracted to the forces of nature both external and internal whereas classicism focused on beauty  
Romanticism focuses on the sublime, that which is beyond rational comprehension

*For the romantics that which is lies behind the veil of illusion is the living force of nature: what the philosopher Schopenhauer called Will, “a mindless, aimless, non-rational urge at the foundation of our instinctual drives, and at the ... being of everything”*  
*(Stanford)*



J. M. Turner, Norham Castle, Sunrise c. 1845

*Just as knowledge emerges only out of incomprehension,  
so what we have knowledge of only stands in the light  
because of an essential darkness.* (Weston 2001: 11)



Caspar David Friedrich, Fog, 1807, The nebulous suggests that which lies behind what we take for granted

REFERENCE: Weston, Michael. 2001. *Philosophy, literature, and the human good*. London ; New York: Routledge.



Ann Veronica Janssens' coloured mist installation, for details go to:

<http://www.installationart.net/Chapter2Immersion/immersion03.html#mistsofimmediacy>

