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The ethics of mountain adventure: education from the tragic and sublime on screen

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider the ethics education potential of two documentary films set in the mountains. I first draw upon the work of Emily Brady in order to tease out some similarities and differences between environmental tragedy and sublime experiences in nature. I secondly argue that the screened sublime is qualitatively different but not necessarily inferior to sublime sensations in nature. I then discuss how the film Mountain showcases the allure of the mountains while also suggesting the search for the sublime there may not be morally justifiable unless it is sustainable. I thereafter unpack the tragic themes in, and moral issues raised by, The Last Mountain. I maintain the film invites viewers to consider the ethics of risky mountain adventures and whether the rewards of such adventures justify the very real risk of tragedy. I conclude by thinking through how the films explored in the paper can aid mountain adventure education in at least two ways: 1) by opening up questions about the moral and ethical frameworks that mountain adventurers have and should have and; 2) by providing viewers with safe and sustainable experiences of the tragic and sublime.

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Adventure education from film

Direct phenomenal experience of the wilderness and nature has long been celebrated as a key component of educationally rich adventure experiences. Mortlock (1984) for example suggested that personal experience of adventures in the wilderness that help people test their limits and feel the full vitality of life might be especially educational. More recently Ingman (2017) found that adventurers regarded challenging oneself outside and escaping from the demands of everyday life as central to meaningful adventure education experiences. I wholly accept that adventures in the wild outdoors can educate those who directly participate in the adventure experience. However, in this paper I want to explore the possibility that some more indirect experiences of adventures in film can also have educational power for film audiences. Rather than asking readers to personally engage in a mountain expedition in order to learn from one's own adventure, this paper proposes that readers watch and reflect on two documentary films set in the mountains in order to learn from the adventures of others. Before going any further, I therefore invite any readers who have not already done so to view *The Last Mountain* and *Mountain*, paying particular attention as they do so to the ethical issues that arise in these films as well as the tragic and sublime themes depicted.

Watching these films in this way will help readers engage with my argument that *Mountain* and *The Last Mountain* can aid mountain adventure education in at least two ways: 1) by opening up

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questions about the moral and ethical frameworks that mountain adventurers have and should have and; 2) by providing viewers with safe and sustainable experiences of the tragic and sublime. No analysis of films is definitive and these films can without doubt be experienced and interpreted differently, but I hope to show readers that my analysis is nonetheless both justifiable, legitimate and relevant. Given that far too many people die during mountain adventures every year within a wider context of worsening environmental crisis, there is in my view, an urgent need for a re-consideration of the ethics and sustainability of conventional mountain adventures, especially those that are high risk or entail high carbon foot prints. My paper therefore aims to open up discussion within adventure education research and practice communities about how adventure education programmes and instructors and mountain adventure leaders can promote safer and more sustainable mountain adventures in the future. While it is my argument that some films set in the mountains have rich, *indirect*, potential for mountain adventure education, I do not claim and do not think that more conventional, *direct*, approaches to mountain adventure should be altogether replaced by such indirect experiences. I do however believe that some films set in the mountains can and should form part of a balanced mountain adventure education, particularly ones that pose germane questions about the ethics and sustainability of mountain adventures.

It is my view that some films about mountain adventures can augment more conventional approaches to mountain adventure education by providing a stimulus for difficult but needed conversations about the ethics and sustainability of mountain adventure experiences. In this paper I therefore discuss *Mountain* and the *Last Mountain* in depth before thinking about the contribution they and other films set in the mountains might make to mountain adventure education. I will first however explore conceptualisations of the sublime, as *Mountain* suggests sublime seeking is a key motivating factor in many conventional mountain adventures. Brady's excellent work on the sublime is particularly relevant here as she suggests sublime experiences in nature are more powerful than cinematic representations of the phenomena—a position I argue against. Far from adventures on screen invariably possessing reduced pedagogical power because they can only provide second hand access to nature and adventure, it is my argument that some mountain adventures in film can be of significant educational value in no small part *because* the appreciative position of film viewers *is* second hand and indirect. In short, not personally being in a risky adventure situation can enable more reflective thinking time from a safe distance on the ethics and sustainability of mountain adventure.

The sublime in nature

Emily Brady (2013) notes the relative neglect of the sublime in recent philosophy and argues the sublime in nature should be a focus of greater attention in contemporary aesthetics. What is the sublime though and why does she think it is still relevant today? Brady provides a helpful history of the concept and typical instantiations of it. She explains how the modern concept of the sublime rose to prominence within eighteenth century aesthetics through the work of theorists like Dennis, Addison and Burke. Brady avers that Kant's concept of the sublime is compatible with an aesthetic appreciation of nature before charting the influence of Kant on later writers including Schiller as well as British romantic poets in the nineteenth century. Brady concludes that what her history of writing on the sublime in modernity shows is that paradigm examples of it are found in nature and involve vast phenomena that cause a mixture of pleasure and anxiety in a human subject. Sublime natural phenomena include but are not limited to the night sky, huge waterfalls or mountains and thunderous lightning storms (Brady, 2013). She argues the term primarily refers to 'natural objects or phenomena having qualities of great height or vastness or tremendous power which cause an intense emotional response characterised by feelings of being overwhelmed and somewhat anxious, though ultimately an experience that feels excitable and pleasurable' (Brady, 2013, p. 8).

Sublime experiences thus usually require interaction between two components. A sublime phenomena or object and a human subject who experiences that phenomena or object with

a deeply felt mixture of anxiety and pleasure. There are however different understandings of the sublime and more than one type of experience can be sublime. While a joy filled terror on a beautiful mountain ridge is one paradigm case of the sublime, other sublime experiences may entail little in the way of overwhelming fear of imminent threat to one's life or wellbeing. Awe or wonder of a more humbling and contemplative sort may be largely felt in place of outright fear. A stargazer may for example look upon the vastness of the night sky and space beyond and feel overwhelmingly small and insignificant in comparison (Brady, 2013). Here the sublime is more contemplatively wonder-filled than life-threatening fearsome. Such recognition of individual human insignificance in the face of the vast universe at night points to another feature of the sublime—it can be connected not just with *vastness* but with *the infinite*. Indeed, Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1959) notes that though early scholars of the sublime such as Dennis, Shaftesbury and Addison all thought natural phenomena like the ocean, stars and sky can stimulate sublime experiences this was so, not simply in virtue of their vastness. Instead, their vastness was reflective of some higher and infinite beauty, the deity. The sublime is thus a concept that can be understood in more secular or theological terms, in terms of *vastness in nature* or in terms of the *infinite manifested in nature*.

A key reason why Brady thinks the sublime is an aesthetic concept of contemporary relevance is that it has an environmental ethical as well as aesthetic dimension (Brady, 2013). She explains that some sublime responses to features of the natural world that are beautiful and vast may leave people with a powerful attachment to that environment and a desire to want to protect and preserve it in the future. Brady suggests, however, that the sublime response is rarely one of straightforward delight at some picturesque beauty. While some scholars like Addison emphasised 'a less terrible sublime' others like Burke emphasised a very terrible one (Brady, 2013, p. 118). While most sublime experiences will entail at least some anxiety, terror or human humbling, it is important to recognise that however terribly the sublime is conceived the dominating overall mood in a person experiencing a classic case of the sublime is generally one of excited pleasure. This is to be sure an excitement combined with anxiety, but the pleasure is still ultimate. However, Brady suggests sublime experiences in nature are not always pleasurable overall. Some sublime experiences involve ultimately difficult, negative emotions (Brady, 2013). Brady thus notably distances her own thinking on the sublime from the 'paradigm cases' view she thinks emerged from her overview of scholarship on the sublime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Cognitive value in the sublime and ethics education from environmental tragedy

If and when a sublime experience is not pleasurable overall can that experience still be of value? Brady claims such sublime moments can be edifying and educational. The sublime is sometimes a cognitively valuable, negative aesthetic experience (Brady, 2013). Brady argues that it is a particular mistake to solely see the value of the sublime in hedonic terms. The sublime after all 'defines a relationship with nature' that is 'uncomfortable' and 'unfriendly' for people because nature is overwhelmingly vast and threatening (Brady, 2013, p 203). In some sublime experiences, people are not left with an overall feeling of pleasure yet the anxiety they feel may still have value. Natural disasters like floods and earthquakes are not pleasurable but might still rightly be called sublime when the 'brutal' and 'destructive' powers of nature help people to learn to 'value confronting the threatening qualities of nature and our vulnerability within nature' (Brady, 2013, p. 163). Such experiences do not need to be pleasurable overall to be cognitively valuable. Sublime experiences of this type can teach people humility about human frailty in the face of uncontrollable natural events (Brady, 2013).

However, when such events cause great harm to living things they are tragic not sublime. When disasters in nature are tragic, people can still learn from them (Brady, 2013). This is perhaps especially the case when the harm has human origin.

> Environmental tragedies such as vast oil spills, extensive strip-mined landscapes, fields of rubber tyres and so on point to destruction caused by humans on a massive scale. These tragic experiences can have the effect of educating us about what humans are capable of and teaching us to avoid continuing such patterns by aiming at more sustainable forms of development. The lesson here is not about distant wild places; rather it is a reminder of our destructive relationship with the environment, here and now, perceiving the negative effect of our actions

(Brady, 2013, p. 202).

Brady argues that the sublime more closely resembles the tragic than the beautiful. The sublime and the tragic in art both involve a mix of positive and negative emotion and both types of experiences have potential to educate (Brady, 2013). Brady, however, stresses one crucial difference between sublime experiences in art and real-life tragedy—with 'the sublime there is shared excitement, with tragedy, shared trauma' (2013, p 164). The sublime and tragic in art involve mixed emotions. Real-life tragedy only involves negative emotions. There are then some similarities and important differences between experiences of the sublime and the tragic gestured towards by Brady. The sublime response classically involves *nature posing* an overwhelming threat to a human subject. In cases of real life environmental tragedy by contrast the subject feels overwhelmed by the threat that *humans pose* to the natural world or the harm they have caused to the natural world. With environmental tragedy, subjects feel *fear for* the natural world, rather than *fear from* the natural world as is often the case with the sublime.

A key difference between environmental tragedy and the sublime is the overall mood of the person experiencing it. In the standard sublime response anxiety and excited joy mix but the overall effect is pleasurable. In some sublime cases, displeasure may dominate but some pleasure is still felt. In cases of environmental tragedy displeasure not only dominates, it entirely overwhelms any possibility for pleasure. The horror at the harm people are causing to the natural world overrides any possible pleasure from the natural world. The classic sublime experience is difficult but ultimately pleasurable. Environmental tragedy is just difficult. This difficulty, this lack of resolution, potentially gives environmental tragedy a great ethical force. Subjects that are left with a profound sense of discomfort at the damage people are causing to the planet may well be highly motivated to improve the ways that human beings relate with and impact upon the natural world. Brady does a fine job of highlighting how experiences of the sublime and tragic in nature may be ethically educational. Her discussion of cinematic depictions of the sublime in nature does not however do justice to the potential of the medium for environmental ethics education, as we shall now see.

The screened sublime: secondary but not second rate

Brady argues that while the sublime is primarily encountered in nature, artworks can also convey a 'secondary' sublime (2013, p 6). While nature can provide first-hand access to the sublime, art can only provide less direct 'second-hand' access (Brady, 2013, p. 123). Brady articulates several reasons to support her view that artworks can only provide a secondary sublime experience. The scale of the sublime in artworks is not as vast as the sublime in nature. The smaller scope of the artistic sublime results in a lesser sublime effect in the human subject. Artworks also lack the power 'to evoke feelings of physical vulnerability' when compared with actual immersion in a threateningly sublime situation in nature (Brady, 2013, p. 120). The primary experience of the sublime in nature is wild, unbounded, dynamic and unframed (Brady, 2013). In contrast, secondary representations of the sublime in artworks are usually framed and have some form imposed into them—they generally lack the disordered, dynamic, free forming and visceral features of the primary sublime in nature. Brady acknowledges that artworks (especially land art) can express a secondary sublime and in interesting ways. She emphasises that second-hand access to the sublime through art is not without significance as it can encourage people to feel a sense of humility towards nature's power. However, she is also clear that artworks cannot provide a full sublime experience. Artworks can depict the sublime

without '*being* sublime themselves' (Brady, 2013, p. 120). Representations of the sublime in art are secondary, derivative, reduced experiences. She puts it thus:

> although the arts may seek to depict, express, embody or in other ways convey sublimity, the particular combination of qualities and effects characteristic of this type of aesthetic response cannot really be captured. In essence, art fails to deliver the whole package. (Brady, 2013, p. 120)

Brady claims the wildness of the sublime can only be 'properly experienced in an environmental context' (Brady, 2013, p. 128) as it is hard to capture the disorderly and dynamic aspects of the wild in artworks. To exemplify this claim, she compares the experience of watching a tornado first hand from a porch to viewing a cinematic depiction of the phenomena. Brady acknowledges that a carefully crafted tornado scene on an IMAX screen could be thrilling. However, she suggests the artistic reproduction will only ever be an impoverished experience when contrasted with the real thing. The natural sublime has a 'multi-sensory' dimension (tactile, auditory and visual) that is absent from artistic recreations (Brady, 2013, p. 128). The cinematic representation will lack the 'in-your-face fury' of a live whirling tornado (Brady, 2013, p. 128). Brady maintains that *appreciative positioning* is crucial to the full sublime experience. 'Sitting in the seat of the cinema, not actually threatened by any physical phenomena at all, the film goer is in a different appreciative position than being on the porch . . . the environmental effects are largely absent from the filmgoers experience (Brady, 2013, p. 128). What should be said in response to this? I agree with Brady in thinking that appreciative positioning is crucial to the sublime experience. However, appreciative closeness to the sublime phenomena is not invariably good as Brady appears to imply. Appreciative closeness might sometimes bring great peril—sometimes greater appreciative distance from the sublime object might be good for people and planet alike. In short, valuable sublime experiences do not have to possess 'in-your-face fury.'

Clewis (2016) implies that the very intensity of some sublime phenomena in nature may detract from rather than be a virtue of the sublime experience. He maintains that in some cases the cinema goer might be better placed to experience the sublime than the person physically near the threatening sublime object as the intense fear might 'block' the sublime effect. I would further argue that the greater distance between sublime phenomena and human subject characteristically present in the screened sublime may also in some cases have potential to add to the cognitive value of sublime experiences. This is something Brady does not consider. When thinking on film Brady focusses her arguments and attention on those dynamically wild and frameless aspects of the sublime likely to invoke anxiety and the threat of physical danger. Brady does not address the question of whether cinematic representations (or for that matter other artworks) are capable of examining and expressing different and distinctive aspects of the sublime better than nature. Brady appears to be guilty of thinking that portrayals of the sublime on screen are invariably derivative and inferior as they cannot precisely replicate the full intensity of sublime experiences found in nature. Brady's argument that personal, first-hand immersion in a sublime situation in nature can bring forth an intensity and immensity of sublime effect that artworks will struggle to replicate is of course sound enough. It is surely beyond dispute that cinematic depictions and explorations of the sublime are qualitatively different from the sublime as it is directly encountered in nature. Films of nature will always lack the full tactile feel of a primary experience in nature. Film can invoke some senses better than others. For example, film can convey the sight and sound of the mountains and the thoughts and emotions of people who climb there but film cannot readily capture the phenomenal feel of the cold snow, wind or rain or the smell of alpine flowers.

While the screened sublime may be a secondary representation rather than a primary experience of the natural sublime this does not mean the screened sublime will always be second rate. Clewis (2016) points out that new technologies now have potential to help filmmakers evoke certain sublime experiences better than nature. The advent of drones with cameras, for example, means that film might be well placed to open up horizons onto the sublime in nature it would be extremely difficult to otherwise access, such as placing the film viewer in the heart of

a tornado. CGI can also now be used to represent the sublime in nature with stunning effect, as disaster movies attest (Clewis, 2016). With its capacity to convey the sublime through a combination of visual, auditory (dialogue, music, song and sound), narrative and even conceptual means, cinema is much more multi-sensory than Brady credits. Brady gets rather stuck on the fact that film cannot exactly mimic all the phenomenal features of primary sublime experiences in nature. She does not acknowledge the possibility that the more distant appreciative position afforded by the screened sublime may in some instances enable a more *reflective engagement* with the sublime that is cognitively valuable. It is however worth thinking about how film might offer distinctive perspectives on the sublime, ones that invite viewers to critically reflect on whether the search for the sublime is always ethically defensible and good for people and planet.

The sublime in *mountain*

Amongst other things, *Mountain* is a film about why some people seek the sublime in the mountains. Directed by Jennifer Peedom, the movie contains extended and routinely awe-inspiring footage of vast mountains from across the globe. The vertiginous images are in places supplemented by an original score from Richard Tognetti, performed by the Australian Chamber Orchestra. The pairing of the wild and disorderly mountain forms with discordant, ancestral sound and song often works wonderfully well.[1] Robert Macfarlane's words in other places replace the accompanying sound and silence. Building on Macfarlane's own book *Mountains of the Mind* and voiced by Willem Defoe, the narration provides part poetic homage to the mountains, part critical history of human fascination with them. The opening 20 min of the movie alone provide a strong challenge to Brady's claim that cinema lacks the multi-sensory capacity to capture the sublime. Here image, narration, poetry, history, philosophy, orchestral sound and siren song come together to convey a powerful sublime effect. The camerawork alone captures the majesty of mammoth mountains. The music mirrors their foreboding. A lone mountaineer descends the frightfully narrow, jagged-edge-ridge of an epic peak. This scene is reminiscent of John Dennis's early description of the sublime based upon his own experience on an alpine ridge in Italy in 1688.

We walk'ed upon the very brink, in a literal sense, of Destruction; one Stumble, and both Life and Carcass had been at once destroy'd. The sense of all this produc'd different motions in me, viz., a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas'd. I trembled (Denis in Macfarlane, 2003, p. 73).

As the lone mountaineer moves on, terrifying staccato strings are set to terrifying staccato steps down. Life on a knife-edge. One misstep and *carcass* would be *destroy'd*. The viewing experience is a horrifying but pleasurable marriage of sight and sound. The sublime on screen here is clearly multi-sensory in so far as sights and sounds combine to create sublime effect. The opening section of the film does not just create powerful sublime effect though. The poetic narration also provides a compelling history of why humans started to seek the sublime in the mountains. The history begins with the observation that until 300 years ago humans by and large feared and revered the mountains—they dared not tread there. Some people worshipped the mighty peaks from lower down but they did not dream of going up them. Life was fragile enough without courting danger and death high in the hills. However, in modernity more and more humans migrated to the increasingly safe cities. Some started to long for a wilder, vaster and more perilous experience. Climbing up to lofty mountain tops met this desire. In the twentieth century a few brave mountaineers first ascended the worlds' highest mountains in the Himalayas. Some lived. Some died. Legends were born and they were told widely. The history of human fascination with mountain adventure began.[2] Sections of the story are worth recounting in full.

> Gradually though … our feelings towards mountains underwent an astonishing change. Fascination replaced trepidation, adventure replaced reverence. As cities grew and we insulated ourselves away from nature – the mountains called us back. The magic of mountains strengthened. Their fierce beauty. Their power to enchant. Their challenge. We went in search of places that were intimidating and uncontrollable, that inspired in us the heady blend of pleasure and terror which we came to call the sublime. This search for the sublime drew us outwards and upwards. The great peaks of the world began to exert a force upon the imagination. A siren song. It was easy to hear. Hard to resist and sometimes fatal. (*Mountain*, 2016)

Environmental tragedy and ego-centric adventure

The history provided in the projection and narration suggests not only that the desire to climb high mountains is often intimately connected with the search for the sublime. It also suggests the stories that were told about heroic deeds in the high mountains became the stuff of legend. These legends transfigured popular perceptions of the mountains and fuelled profuse desires for adventure there. Defoe later tells the audience that today millions migrate to the mountains in search of the sublime. A very modern species of mountain worship en masse has arisen. A montage of mass migration to the mountains is projected on screen that lay the visual foundation for Defoe's verbal message. Cars, trucks and lorrys ascend twisty mountain passes by the dozen. Huge summit car parks fill up to the brim. Hundreds of skiers and snowboarders jostle together on the slopes with little space between them. Throngs gather waiting to board ski-lifts, the lifts themselves mass conveyer belts of would-be-adventurers. These projections have a vast scale to them but they are not sublime but environmentally tragic. Each adventurer leaving a carbon footprint behind them. Taken together, by the million, these footprints will not melt away in summer like steps in the snow. These are imprints of environmental degradation. While the first phase of Peedom's film provides a historical perspective on the pursuit of the sublime in the mountains, the second phase offers a critical contemporary one.

The narration and images in the second part of the film invite viewers to question whether the mass mountain adventures of today are good for the earth's ecosystems and whether the search for the sublime is sustainable. *Mountain* shows that increasingly there are far too many people travelling to the mountains from places far and wide in search of the sublime. The search for the sublime today is contributing to environmental tragedy and climate change. *Mountain* thus offers an objection to Brady's implication that the screened sublime is a reduced sublime. It reveals how the more objective, reflective and distant appreciative position afforded to the cinema goer need not be a vice but a virtue of the screened sublime. *Mountain* shows that film may often be better placed to capture the collective carbon footprint of mass mountain adventure than single primary experiences of the sublime in the wild. The montage of pollution is pooled together in *Mountain* in a matter of moments but the viewer is not directly threated *by nature*. Instead the viewer gets a window into the harm humans pose *to nature*. *Mountain* not only screens the sublime then, it also does so in a way that encourages the viewer to reflect from a safe distance on the ethics and sustainability of sublime seeking today. The various vistas may be less visceral that a single sublime experience in nature but they arguably have significantly more cognitive value—the environmental impact of mass mountain adventure is laid bare before the viewer.

Mountain also suggests the search for the sublime in the high peaks has today increasingly morphed into a story of mountain commodification, of exploitation, of wildness lost. We later see hundreds of tents packed tightly side by side at the base camp for Everest. A human sprawl on what was until recently one of the world's last wild places. Scores of climbers queue one after the other, in a dense line of bodies all desperate to get to the top of the world. After witnessing these images the audience needs little convincing that 'this is not exploration, it is crowd control. This is the modern industry of ascent in which the risks are often taken most by those who have least,' the Sherpa. These words are intended to wake us from sleep walking into further tragic damage. Worse still is that risky mountain adventure is often both addictive and maddening. Defoe voices over that:

> adventurers sometimes liken fear to a rat. When you take risks you feed the rat with fear – but each time you feed it that fear it grows fatter, so then you must feed it more fear to sate it and yet more again and then still more until a madness bites . . . Many who travel to mountain tops are half in love with themselves and half in love with oblivion.

The film suggests that as more and more wild places are commodified into mass leisure spaces, today's mountain adventurers are increasingly compelled to go to other wild places and make them a bit less wild too. When there they find ever more outlandish ways of doing what has not yet been done. To other worldly Sigur Ros like background music, various novel deeds of daring do in the mountains are depicted including a be-winged adventurer gliding like a kite perilously near rocky slopes and a paraglider on skis gracefully swirling and swooping up and down from air to snow as well as Danny Macaskill's astonishing mountain bike descent from the inaccessible pinnacle on Skye. It is hard not to marvel at the adventurous acts on screen. They are truly sublime in the life on the brink sense. Make no mistake though, 'mountain mania' is more commercialised, ego-centric and oblivion bringing than ever.

Sustainable sublime seeking

The second phase of *Mountain* suggests mass adventurous sublime seeking in the mountains today is unsustainable and more and more driven by a thrill seeking, perhaps even narcissistic spirit. The more contemplative awe that early adventurers felt towards the mountains, progressively, bit by bit in the background. However, the mood of the final phase of the film is more meditative and suggests that a less self-centred sublime experience in mountains is still possible. Defoe opines that mountains are 'like echoes in a cave—they will answer back with whatever you call into it'. In my view the final phase of the film suggests that the mountain adventurers of today and tomorrow do not have to continue down the ego-centric path to oblivion in the fashion of Narcissus. In the final section of the film the gaze of the camera turns from adventures in the mountains to the magnificence of the mountains themselves. The viewer is confronted with a succession of images of vast high peaks untouched by human presence—it is clear from these shots that mountains may well be more magnificent without human adventure. The viewer is encouraged to contemplate the absolute indifference of mountains to human projects and passions. Defoe notes that mountains 'don't seek our love or seek our deaths. They want nothing from us and yet they shift the way we see ourselves. They weather our spirits, challenge our arrogance, restore our wonder—more than ever we need their wildness'. These closing comments and images carry an unambiguous moral message. It may well be better for the planet if people stop travelling to mountains in their masses. Mountains are best left in their wild state, free from human narcissism.

If people do need to seek the sublime in the mountains, then a more sustainable sublime should be sought. A humbling sublime grounded in a feeling of wonder at the vast endurance of mountains. The audience is after all reminded that mountains live in deep time and are so much older than the human species as well as vaster—we are insignificant when set against such scale. The film shows that the perspective of deep time should not breed nihilistic abandon but a sense of wonder at time past and care for time that is yet to be. Sped up shots of high glaciers heave up and down with the seasons, like the lungs of the world, drawing deep breaths of air in and out. We are told that though the mountains are indifferent to us they also give us life—we are shown that they are the source of fresh air, of rain carrying clouds, of the rivers that sustain us. The mountains do not need people—we need them. Mountains sustain us but if we are going to carry on being sustained by them we need to live more sustainably alongside them. Human sublime seeking has taken a dark turn but the third phase of the film does also offer some catharsis and hope. A different type of more sustainable sublime seeking is within human reach if a spirit of mountain 'mystery' replaces that of mountain 'mastery.' *Mountain* encourages such spirit towards the end and in so doing it has much to teach about the nature, value and imprint of sublime seeking pursuits in the mountains. *Mountain* reveals that sometimes cinema can

provide some much needed critical reflective distance between sublime object and human subject. Unlike many primary sublime experiences in the wild, the film does not thrust viewers into a state of direct fear for themselves. Instead the film enables thinking time about the ethics of mass modern mountain adventure. The film allows viewers to see mass mountain sublime seeking today for what it often is—climate damaging as well as anxiously thrilling. The more distant 'secondary' position of film viewer is crucial to the emergence of this environmental ethical perspective.

The primary experience of the sublime in the mountains may carry an irreplicable dangerous excitement with it but the intensity of overwhelming threat felt in sublime subjects in nature sometimes has a downside. Fear and excitement may overwhelm to the point of diverting all attention away from more reflective thought about the wider environmental impact of sublime seeking on mass. *Mountain* by contrast unambiguously encourages viewers to experience the vast collective carbon foot print of modern mountain adventure on mass. The second phase of the film directly confronts the audience with the fact that some mountain sublime seeking turns environmentally tragic. The film provides a set of secondary sublime experiences in the mountains but they may well have greater potential for environmental ethics education than many primary sublime experiences in the mountains, particularly those of a more thrill seeking and egocentric sort. In sum, Peedom's film does not just represent the sublime on screen powerfully. It provides a history of sublime seeking in the mountains. A history that invites viewers to consider what type of sublime mountain experiences are most worth seeking in the future. An ego-centric sublime in thrall to thrill and *threat from nature to one's own well-being*, or an eco-centric sublime rooted in wonder with the world and *fear for the future of the planet*. *Mountain* showcases the allure of the mountains but in a way that encourages viewers to consider the possibility that sublime seeking in the mountains may not be morally justifiable unless it is sustainable—unless it is eco-centric not ego-centric.

Tragic loss and public grief in *the Last mountain*

The Last Mountain is another mountain documentary with tragic themes but the tragedy in question is more personal and human than environmental. The film is directed by Chris Terrill and screens the haunting true story of Tom and Kate Ballard. Their mother Alison Hargreaves, was the first woman to summit Everest alone and without extra oxygen in 1995. However, a few months after this momentous achievement she tragically died during another Himalayan climb near the top of K2. Tom was only 6 at the time of his mother's death and Kate even younger. Early in the film we see Tom and Kate as children travelling with their father Jim to the Himalaya's to 'see Mummy's last mountain.' Most of the film however focusses on when Tom and Kate are young adults. We see footage of Tom's strength, skill and grace on rock and ice faces. We learn that Tom has become one of the world's top climbers and the first to summit all of the main northern Alpine mountain faces in a single winter season. This is a record similar to one set by his mother who was the first woman to climb all the same peaks in the summer. Tragically we also learn that Tom died in 2019 when attempting to summit a high Himalayan mountain, Nanga Parbat, only 100 or so miles away from where his mother perished on K2.

The movie thus raises the difficult thought that Tom was not just seeking mountain glory or the sublime when scaling the treacherous, never topped Mummery Spur route up Nanga Parbat that cost him his life—he was maybe also seeking connection with his lost mother. *The Last Mountain* is not just a portrait of double tragic death though but of double tragic grief and intergenerational trauma. In one particularly uncomfortable moment Kate telephones her father to explain that a helicopter has spotted what would appear to be the dead bodies of Tom and his climbing partner Daniele Nardi. Kate is understandably shaken by events but Jim is disturbingly detached from them. In a curiously cold tone he implores her to move on from the death of Tom even before this death has been confirmed. Jim tells Kate that she really does "need to try and find something to do that takes your mind off it, so you can go back to trying to remember the good times." There is a more than a hint of Antigone's anger with King Creon in Kate's distraught rebuke of her father.[3] Once Tom's death is confirmed Kate decides

to embark on her second pilgrimage to the Himalaya's to see the mountain where a loved one died. Her father does not accompany her this time but Ibrahim the Sherpa who carried Kate on her first pilgrimage does. A distressed Kate almost falls into Ibrahim's arms when they are first reunited. Unlike Jim, Ibrahim here seems able to acknowledge and hold her pain and grief.

Kate also meets another unsympathetic man—the Italian ambassador in Pakistan who oversaw the search and rescue of her brother. Pontecorvo, the said ambassador, puffs on a fat cigar as he callously relays the harrowing details of Tom's last moments to Kate. The ambassador appears to almost relish telling Kate that Tom probably died a cruel, slow and painful death. Kate is devastated by this development. Until then she thought Tom died peacefully in his sleep. Kate breaks down in front of the camera emotionally telling viewers that today to have heard that they were hanging, dangling, dying slowly, fully aware of what was going on, his exact words were a cruel death, that's big news. I could be happier and live easier knowing that he was at peace but to hear that he could have been really suffering for a long time and we couldn't get to them is heart-breaking. The film culminates with Kate talking through how visiting the Himalayas again helped her see how even though Tom's body may never be found it is almost like her mum is cradling him forever now. Kate again breaks down in tears saying she wishes she could be with them, but that as hard as this time is, she knows they died doing what they wanted to do. She hugs the camera man.

Kate acknowledges she may never fully recover from the trauma of losing her mother and brother. Their deaths do not seem to deter her from risky adventure however. Instead as the films end Kate embarks on a snowy paraglide as she confesses to feeling a duty to be extraordinary like her mother and brother. It is hard not to worry about her fate. The in depth focus on Kate's trauma opens up questions about the ethics of filmmakers documenting intense real life grief. What would normally be private moments of personal trauma are being made very public. A feeling lingers that Kate's grief is being exploited by the director for his artistic gain. However, perhaps being involved in the documentary also provided Kate with space to process her trauma, a space sometimes denied by others. Kate's willingness to engage with a filming process that raised awareness of Tom's thrilling life and difficult death, in spite of her fathers' imploration to move on, resembles Antigone's fight with Creon for a proper pubic burial for her brother Polynices. Her open expression of grief certainly amplifies the tragic mood of the film. Foley (2001) after all notes that while women were often debarred from much public life in ancient Greece, female characters in tragedies like Antigone often openly lamented the loss of loved ones and questioned the norms of the day.

Film and the ethics of mountain adventure education

The Last Mountain can then be understood as a cautionary tale about the loss and grief that ensues when risky mountain adventures turn tragic. Perhaps experiencing the raw intensity of Kate's trauma can also be educational for the audience. Perhaps it can invite reflection on whether risky high mountain adventures are ever morally justifiable given the possible loss of life to those involved and the cost of lasting trauma to loved ones. Kate is not the only tragic female hero in *The Last Mountain* though. In some respects Alison Hargreaves is the very embodiment of a tragic hero. Alison was clearly a skilled and brave mountaineer and inspiration to women but she also made a grave error. In the *Poetics* Aristotle (1996) makes clear that the hero of tragic plots falls into misfortune through error (hamartia). Hargreaves hamartia was her hubris. Early in the film she insists she would never embark on a mountain climb that would threaten her life now she was a mum. Her hubris stopped her from seeing that the high Himalayan mountains she was speaking about climbing are inherently risky no matter how talented the climber. Her hubris cost her life and probably contributed to her son losing his too. The film thus opens up some difficult questions about the ethics of parenting and adventure education. Should one of the world's top climbers have to give up their passion and profession when they become a parent? Conversely given the lasting deep trauma that could scar the lives of those left behind, are high-risk icy mountain adventures ever morally justified for parents of young children? Was the mountain adventure education provided to Tom and Kate by their

parents (where they were taught to hone their climbing skills from a very young age and to make their own risk assessments as they grew up but within a family environment of high-risk adventures being normalised) good for them? Would it be a good mountain adventure education for anyone?

Clarke (2022) suggests that Hargreaves suffered from sexist double standards as she faced media criticism for climbing 8000'ers as a mother, accusations not usually directed at male alpinists. The film does not, however, offer clear answers to these questions—it shows the tragic consequences of the choices of Alison, Jim, Tom and Kate but it remains morally ambiguous. The viewer can decide for themselves what to make of these issues. However the feel of the film is utterly tragic. Critchley maintains that what the tragic experience invites is 'the *difficulty* and *uncertainty* of action in a world defined by ambiguity, where right always seems to be on both sides' (2019, p 5). He suggests that tragedy slows life down in such a way that we can come to see and know things about ourselves that we were previously blind to. Tragedies can help us see how familial relationship patterns (especially with our parents) radically shape our actions and fate (Critchley, 2019). Kate comments that no-one knows why Tom climbs. Tom attributed his love of the mountains to his anti-social nature. Like classical tragic heroes before them (think Oedipus), Tom and Kate seem genuinely blind to an underlying motive that surely influenced his actions and fate—seeking a connection with his lost mother. The audience to *The Last Mountain* is however invited to see this tragic connection. When the Sherpa accompanying Tom and Daniele abandoned the summit attempt as they did not think conditions were safe the viewer is left to ponder why Tom and Daniele chose to carry on.

The narrative in the film suggests that Daniele was more responsible for rash decision making than the impressionable Tom. This view is disputed by Clarke (2022) who notes that Nardi knew Nanga Parbat better than anyone in the world and was the more experienced high altitude climber. Leger (2019) speculates that it was Tom's insatiable desire to challenge himself that more than anything led to his death on Nanga Parbat. There may be something to each of these conclusions but they lack the balance of the tragic perspective. Tom was a mountaineer with drive and otherworldly talent but he was also a little boy lost, looking for his lost mum. The route up the Mummery Spur they were attempting was more than just a challenge, it was a death trap, as the film makes clear. Reinhold Messner, the first climber to successfully summit all the world's mountains over 8000 metres (including Nanga Parbat) regarded the route as suicidal, remarking on screen that 'everyone has the right to choose where they kill themselves'. This ethic of adventure is deeply problematic and by portraying the consequences of this ethic lived out, the film implicitly opens up the question of whether mountaineers sometimes ought to be saved from themselves. Remaining true to the tragic form, the film is ambiguous on the matter. The film could, however, be employed in outdoor education settings to open up questions about the formal ethical frameworks that mountaineers are expected to follow. The Mountain Ethic Declaration of The International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA, 2023) for example encourages mountaineers to 'stretch their limits' and 'aim for the top' in a context where individuals are responsible for their own safety and where mountaineers must be prepared for 'serious accidents or death' and be ready to 'face the consequences of tragedy'.

After watching the film again and thinking about this Declaration I could not help but wonder if some of the ethical codes of mountaineering are robust enough in respect to risk. Ethics is not just about taking individual responsibility—it is also about taking into account the possible impact of our actions on others. The Declaration does to be sure stress that mountaineers should be willing to help other fellow adventurers in difficulty but it does not encourage them to think about the trauma they could cause to their loved ones if they are lost to the hills. The Mountain Ethic Declaration thus endorses a deeply individualistic code in regard to risk that permits a reasonable chance of death to participants as well as tragic suffering to their loved ones. Is this really ethically justifiable though? Bernard Williams after all commented that the principle of relying on people not being killed should be given high deliberative priority in any justifiable ethics (Williams, 2011, p. 205). Should preventing tragedy in the mountains not be more morally important than merely being willing to face the consequences of it? More charitably, perhaps facing the consequences of tragedy could also involve

feeling the pain of it and then acting to prevent it in the future. Perhaps some films can help audiences face the consequences of tragedy in the mountains in ways that can be educational? It has after all recently been argued that films with tragic themes sometimes depict characters who make mistakes in such a way that the audience can learn not to repeat them (MacAllister, 2023). Audiences of tragic art often suffer with characters but from a safe distance as no real life harm can come to them. This capacity to generate audience suffering but from a safe distance is a great merit of the tragic form.[4] Kate was not kept at a safe distance from tragic suffering though. What is worse is that she did not choose to face tragedy, her loved ones imposed this on her through the risks they took. *The Last Mountain* shows that though it is individual mountaineers who take risks, if they die in the hills, it is their loved ones that have to face the consequences. After all, the dead cannot face anything for they are dead. The tragic consequences of their risk taking must be faced by those who loved them.

Perhaps experiencing some of Kate's pain from a safe distance might help audiences to think about whether it is ethically justifiable for mountaineers to risk their own life and risk causing deep trauma to their loved ones too. In my view anyone involved in risky mountain adventure attempts would benefit from watching *The Last Mountain*, not least because it also opens up questions about whether some of the ethical codes that guide mountaineering are fit for purpose. In almost any other walk of life if someone was embarking on a course of action with a reasonable chance of death, urgent intervention would be regarded as morally warranted. Such intervention is a guiding principle of mental health. Tom and Daniele were clearly in the grip of a certain mountain madness, a summit fever that they needed saving from. They cannot be saved though and therein lies the tragedy but mountaineers of today and tomorrow can be saved from a similar fate if they are encouraged to adopt a 'less aim for the top' irrespective-of-the-risk-of-tragedy-ethic. In *The Living Mountain* Nan Shepherd describes the madness that sometimes accompanies record breaking attempts up mountains as *fey*. Those who are fey in the mountains, are often men who become 'doomed to death' (2011, p 6) because they 'exalt' too much in the thrill of the climb and fail to attend with proper care to the conditions at hand and foot. Shepherd suggests that being obsessed with a summit in icy conditions is 'folly.' She instead commended a less summit focussed and more careful and attentive approach to mountaineering. She memorably encouraged mountain goers to tilt their heads down and look between their legs to see the world from a different, ego-free and non-anthropocentric perspective.

> Lay the head down, or better still, face away from what you look at, and bend with straddled legs till you see the world upside down. How new it has become! From the close-by sprig of heather to the most distant fold of the land, each detail stands erect in its own validity . . . Details are no longer part of a grouping in a picture of which I am the focal point, the focal point is everywhere. Nothing has reference to me, the looker. This is how the earth must see itself. (Shepherd, 2011, p. 11)

It is my argument that some films about mountains (like *Mountain*) might contribute to outdoor and adventure education by helping viewers to see the world with a less ego-centric perspective and a more eco-centric one. Other films like *The Last Mountain* also ought to be watched and discussed by staff and students in outdoor and adventure education programmes in order to prompt reflection on whether mountaineering codes of ethics are fit for purpose and whether men especially need new forms of mountain adventure education, ones that show the suffering that can ensue from a reach-for-the-top-irrespective-of-the-tragic-consequences-ethic. More than 100 of the 114 deaths in Scottish mountains between 2012 and 2019 were after all men—with men being more likely to take risks and less likely than women to attend mountain safety training (Brooks, 2022). Of course, many excellent movies set in the mountains will not offer any overt educational message, ethical or otherwise. Some films set in the mountains may also miseducate by for example adopting a thoroughly Western Gaze onto a mountain tragedy as is the case in *Everest*.

Such films should be critically interrogated and perhaps discussed alongside stories like the famous anti-expedition up Tseringma. On this 1971 climb, the pioneer of ecosophy Arne Naess and two fellow Norwegians set out *not to* climb a sacred mountain but to instead

travel in a more ethical way that honoured local traditions (Henderson, 2021). Films like *Sherpa* could also be meaningfully integrated into outdoor and adventure education programmes as this film (unlike *Everest*) explores in depth the tragic impact of Westerner's climbing in the Himalayas on the Sherpa. I do of course recognise the limits that film might have to change the minds and behaviours of people who are either not open to changing at all or those who are but still find the siren song of the mountain top, too beguiling.[5] However, this does not mean that some films like *The Last Mountain* cannot form part of a meaningful alternative mountain adventure education through film, one that aims to trouble the aim-for-the-top-ethic-irrespective-of-the-risk-of-tragedy. This ethic is evident in formal ethical codes of mountaineering and tragically it is still adopted by far too many mountain adventurers today. My hope is that films like *The Last Mountain* might educate at least some audiences (be they the general public or those actively involved in mountain adventures) by helping them to learn from the tragic mistakes of others rather than see them repeated. The alternative form of mountain adventure education from films like *Mountain* and *The Last Mountain* can, if heeded, help to save lives, prevent tragic suffering and be good for the planet.

In this paper, I have proposed that *Mountain* and *The Last Mountain* can fruitfully aid mountain adventure education in at least two ways: 1) by opening up questions about the moral and ethical frameworks that mountain adventurers have and should have and; 2) by providing viewers with safe and sustainable experiences of the tragic and sublime. I have maintained that *The Last Mountain* may ethically educate by inviting the audience to reflect on whether high icy mountain adventures are ever morally justifiable. The film also opens up questions about the ethics of mountain adventure education and whether it is good for children to be brought up in an environment where high risk climbing is normalised. I have also argued that *Mountain* shows viewers how the screened sublime need not be second rate. Instead, the film demonstrates how the screened sublime can have significant cognitive and educational value when its sheds light on how the search for the sublime in high octane or mass mountain adventures contributes to environmental tragedy. *Mountain* after all encourages viewers to consider the carbon footprint of mountain adventure. While the film suggests mountains may be most magnificent when free of human presence, I have not argued and do not think that people should never physically undertake mountain adventures. A positive mountain adventure experience can be of great educational value for those involved, and it may encourage greater protection of wild spaces in the future. However, it is my argument that as the human species thinks about how to look after people and planet better in the future, mountain adventures in film may offer less risk of tragedy and be more sustainable than the real thing. Taken together *Mountain* and *The Last Mountain* suggest people should travel to the mountains for adventure a lot less. If and when people are in the mountains they should adventure there with great care and with full awareness that wanting to reach the summit whatever the cost is tragic not heroic. These films may well depict secondary sublime and tragic experiences but by encouraging careful, sustainable adventure, they may well also provide the most valuable mountain adventure education of all.

Notes

1. However, Bradshaw (2017), perhaps a little harshly, felt the use of Vivaldi's *Winter* in other places was a little unimaginative and 'off the peg.'
2. Macfarlane provides a similar history to this in his *Mountains of the Mind* (2003).
3. See Heaney (2004) for a modern retelling of Antigone.
4. Lear (1998) also holds that tragic dramas provide audiences with safe spaces to experience pity and fear directed towards actors who make mistakes and when either they or their loved ones suffer as a consequence.
5. Howell (2011) for example found that though many viewers were initially motivated to effect positive change immediately after watching the climate change film *The Age of Stupid*, after 10–14 weeks these effects had not persisted.

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