

# The Environmental Sublime

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Llyn Cau "crater" from Cader Idris summit

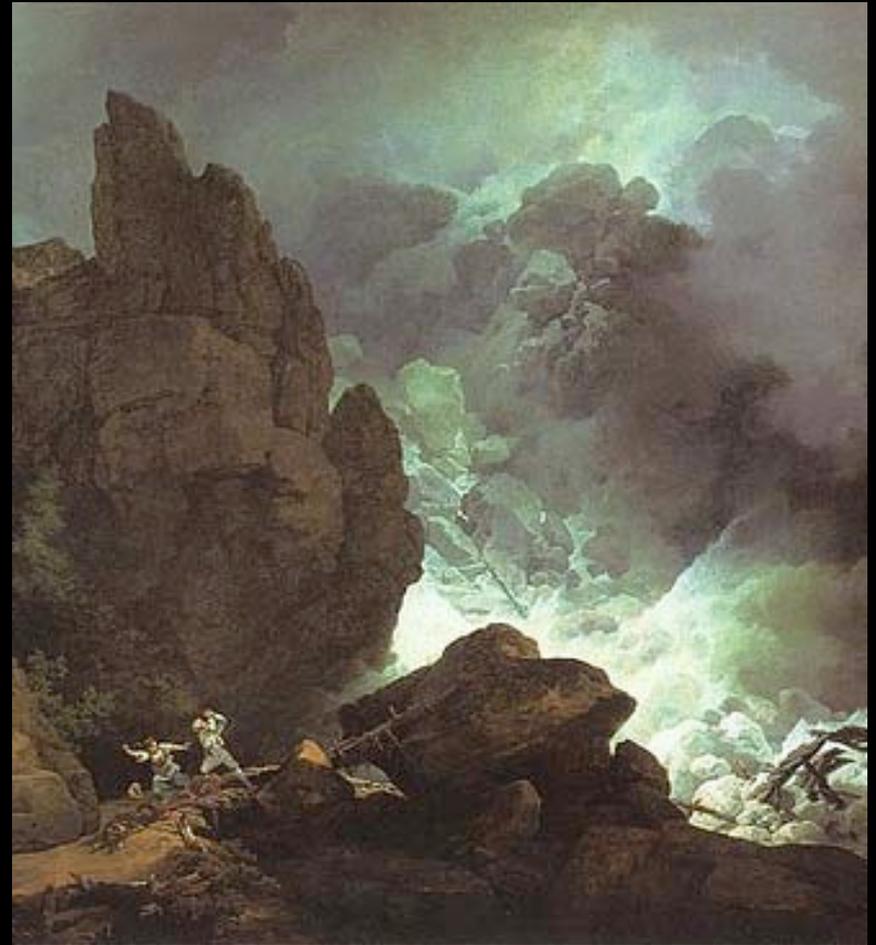
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# Historical notions of the sublime

- The noun, 'sublime', originates in the Greek noun *hupsos*, or height, while its Latin meaning is *sublimis*, or elevated, uplifted, aloft. Its etymology stems from (probably) *sub*, 'up to' and *limen*, 'lintel' .
- 'Sublime' can refer to something that is high or lofty, but also refers to the response where one feels elevated or uplifted.
- Sublime involves a relation between the sublime 'thing' and a particular aesthetic experience or response) in the subject

# Historical notions of the sublime

- Theoretical discussion of the sublime reached a pinnacle in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- Alongside beauty, novelty, ugliness, and the picturesque, the sublime became a central category of aesthetic value in both nature and art.

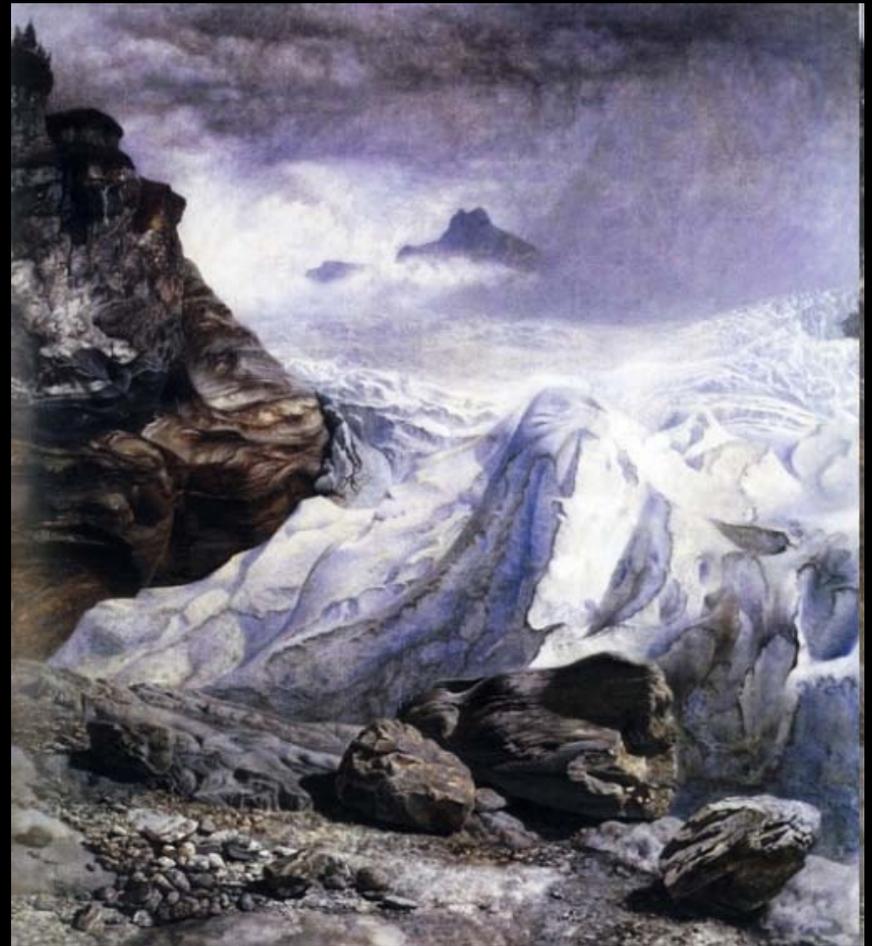


P. Louterbourg, *An Avalanche*, 1803, Tate Britain

# Historical notions of the sublime

*[F]or though they [works of art] may sometimes appear as beautiful or strange, they can have nothing in them of that vastness and immensity, which afford so great an entertainment to the mind of the beholder....There is something more bold and masterly in the rough careless strokes of nature, than in the nice touches and embellishments of art. The beauties of the most stately garden or palace lie in a narrow compass, the imagination immediately runs them over, and requires something else to gratify her; but, in the wide fields of nature, the sight wanders up and down without confinement, and is fed with an infinite variety of images, without any certain stint or number.*

(J. Addison, 1712)



John Brett, *Glacier of Rosenlauri*, 1856, Tate Britain

# What is the sublime?: a contemporary view drawing on the past

*Natural objects or phenomena having qualities of great height or vastness or tremendous power which cause an intense emotional response characterized by feelings of being overwhelmed, somewhat anxious or fearful, though ultimately an experience that feels both exciting and pleasurable. (Brady, 2013)*

# How does the sublime differ from the beautiful?

## Sublime

- 'Formless'
- Vastness, immensity, power which is overwhelming
- Disordered; wild
- Mixed emotional response: 'delightful horror'

## Beautiful

- Form
- More 'ordered'
- Positive emotions (pleasure, delight)
- Grandeur: beauty on a grand scale

# The sublime and the beautiful

*For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. (Edmund Burke, 1759)*



# The *humbling* sublime: nature

*The most perfect models of sublimity are seen in the works of nature. Pyramids, palaces, fireworks, temples, artificial lakes and canals, ships of war, fortifications, hills levelled and caves hollowed by human industry, are mighty efforts, no doubt, and awaken in every beholder a pleasing admiration; but appear as nothing, when we compare them, in respect of magnificence, with mountains, volcanoes, rivers, cataracts, oceans, the expanse of heaven, clouds and storms, thunder and lightning, the sun, the moon, and stars. So that, without the study of nature, a true taste in the sublime is absolutely unattainable.*

James Beattie, 1783



Snowdon (North Wales Photography)

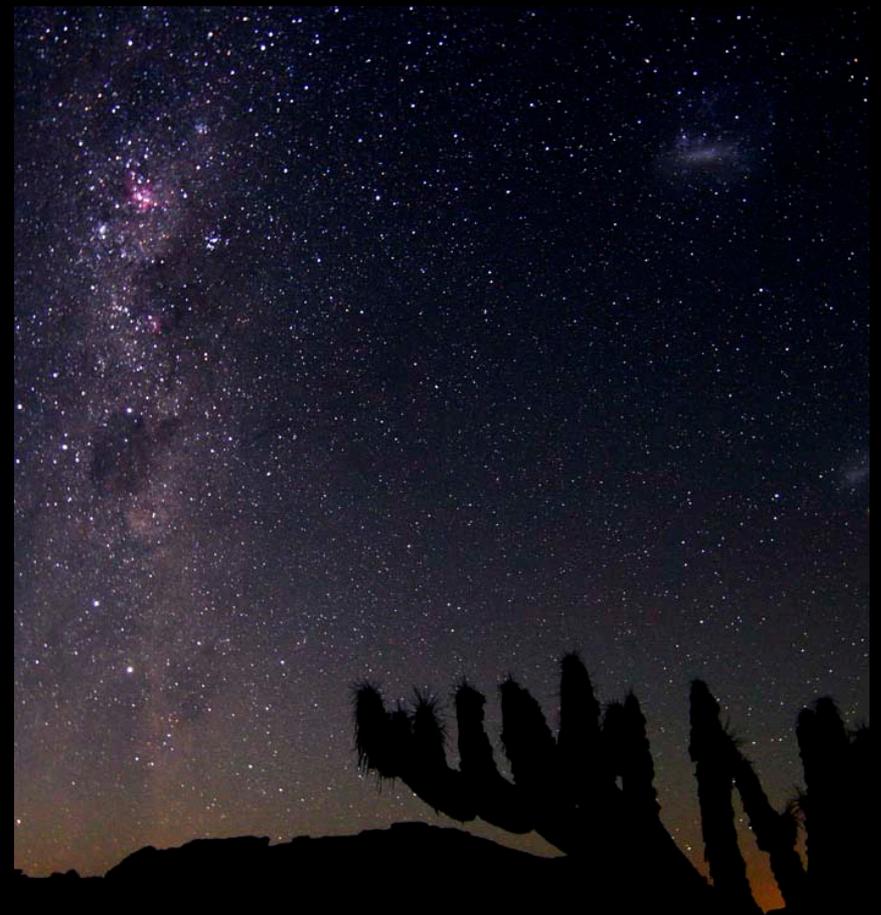
# The sublime: decentring the human



- Uneasy, challenging aesthetic engagement with nature
- Experiencing the ungraspable (in some sense)

# Sublime experience and environmental ethics

1. Aesthetic experience and the cultivation of moral feeling
2. Learning lessons from the sublime



# Sublime experience and environmental ethics

## 3. Developing an aesthetic-moral relationship through the sublime

- Promethean fear, distance *and* engagement



# Promethean fear

*...our sense of restraint in the face of nature, a sense very basic to conservation concerns, will be grounded in a form of fear: a fear not just of the power of nature itself, but what might be called Promethean fear, a fear of taking too lightly or inconsiderably our relations to nature...*

*...Not all our environmental concerns will be grounded in Promethean fear. Some of them will be grounded in our need for the other powers of nature, those associated with the beautiful. But the thoughts which, if these speculations point in the right direction, are associated with the sublime and with Promethean fear will be very important, for they particularly affirm our distinction, and that of our culture, from nature, and conversely, the thought that nature is independent of us, something not made, and not adequately controlled.*

Bernard Williams, 1995

# Summary

- The sublime is a distinctive form of aesthetic valuing of nature involving massive or powerful qualities and causing an overwhelming feeling; an anxious pleasure.
- The sublime's greatness is humbling, enabling us to recognize ourselves as not necessarily powerful over nature, but as having admiration for distinctive qualities in nature.
- The sublime, as a form of aesthetic valuing, can engender a respectful attitude towards nature – hopefully leading to an interest in protecting sublime places.

# References

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