Thinking *with a* Mountain: A Narratological and Rhetorical Analysis of the Haptic Sublime in Jon Krakauer's Mountaineering Memoirs

From the Mountain to the Haptic Sublime: Reducing Distance to Experience Minor Affects

Mountains are the epitomes of the natural sublime. From Longinus to Thomas Burnet and Joseph Addison, they were deemed sublime because of their size and greatness, which were commonly associated with the divine or sacred (Brady 2013, 16; Shaw 2017, 28–38). Edmund Burke later influentially theorized and systematized the sublime as provoking 'delightful horror' (Burke, 1998, 67) while Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel claimed that mountains symbolized 'massiveness' as well as the 'infinite,' 'inaccessible,' and 'unknowable' (Brady 2013, 80; Shaw 2017, 151). For most of these thinkers, literary description was the optimal means of expressing the ineffable features of the romanticized sublime experience while staying at a safe distance from the threatening material object. For example, Burke's landmark *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and more specifically its section on 'words,' is an invitation to inquire into the ability of the literary imagination to produce emotions of awe and terror. Although outdated, Burke's typology of 'aggregate,' 'simple abstract,' and 'compounded abstract' words urges readers to interpret poetic associations as imaginative attempts to describe the unpresentable and their ability to 'affect [readers] often as strongly as the things they represent, and sometimes much more strongly' (Burke, 1998, 161).

In her influential *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (1959), Marjorie Hope Nicolson emphasizes the role of pre-Romantic poetic description in shaping a 'new Sublime' of a godly and infinite nature, which can

spiritually elevate the beholder of mountains by confronting her with the limits of her understanding (1959, 329; Shaw 2017, 98). More recently, Gene Ray has referred to the pre-Romantic or late seventeenth-century enthusiasm for Nicolson's 'new Sublime' as the 'mountain sublime.' The 'mountain sublime,' Ray (2005, 26) argues, occurred among the 'English elite' and 'within the context of latent and emergent imperialist competition,' which might have contributed to establishing it as a conventional aesthetic view. This 'elite passion for wild land' is also part of what historian William Cronon identifies as the 'trouble with wilderness.' In his eponymous provocative essay, Cronon (1995, 9) claims that many nineteenth and early twentieth-century 'elite urban tourists' tended to visit mountains and the wilderness for mere 'recreation,' as a way of 'project[ing] their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape' without further exploring its complexity. If this form of tourism is characteristic of an aesthetic shift from what historian Roderick F. Nash (2014) refers to as 'antipathy' to 'appreciation' of wilderness, this relationship is still problematic, especially in the current ecological context. Indeed, while the sublime and romantic poetry associated the divine with mountains or the wilderness, which contributed to the development of preservation ethics (Nash 2014, 44–45), they have nurtured a fraught relationship to overpowering mountains. More specifically, most traditional theories of the sublime suggest a purely visual and imaginative experience or distant mountain *view* which has influentially shaped the Western relationship with nature (Caracciolo 2021, 299). Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the traditional mountain sublime did not mature into a more direct or collective experience, and it is still incompatible with the current context of the Anthropocene, in which the reality of nature can no longer be estranged from humanity and its culture (Vermeulen 2020, 37–40). If it is to become a viable aesthetic mode in the Anthropocene, Marco Caracciolo argues, the sublime needs to account for affects that move beyond the confines of the experience of awe and horror (2021, 299–300).

According to Sianne Ngai, such affects could be 'minor affects,' namely 'animatedness, envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplimity, paranoia, and disgust,' which she uses to examine 'a multiplicity of other representational and theoretical dilemmas' (2005, 37). This essay attempts to examine descriptions of minor affects such as tedium, pain, and euphoria as parts of contemporary sublime moments. More precisely, it interprets these minor affects as emerging through the 'haptic sublime,' a recent avatar of the sublime coined by Alan McNee which has replaced the distant contemplation of the traditional sublime by a direct and embodied experience of landscapes, or a haptic experience of mountain *terrain* (as opposed to mountain *view*) that is felt in muscles, skin, lungs, and heart (2016, 4). The affects produced by haptic sublime moments are analyzed as '*narrative affect[s]*' in Jon Krakauer's mountaineering memoirs, namely 'body-based feelings' that are 'attached to formal dimensions of texts such as metaphor, plot structure, and character relations,' and therefore contribute to understanding the complex or 'coconstitutive' relationship the author develops with his environment (Houser 2014, 3–8, emphasis in original).

The Anthropocene has shed light on notions of scale and environmental responsibility and, like the sublime, is customarily linked to senses of excess, overwhelm, and disorientation (Purdy 2015, 421). The memoir, as an inevitably human-centered and 'actively constructive' genre which 'must refer to an extra-textual reality' by means of narrative technique such as self-questioning (Couser 2011, 55–74), is a privileged site to investigate the revisions of the sublime and the variety of affects it produces. What is more, some contemporary mountaineering memoirs such as Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (1996), as McNee (2016, 221) remarks, reconsider sublime mountains in a more anthropogenic context insofar as they are concerned by the 'rampant commercialism, egotism, and ruthlessness that characterize modern […] mountaineering, and [its] consequences for the mountain environment.' In fact, these memoirs echo the genre of what ecocritic and ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo terms 'material

memoir' in that the self 'is coextensive with the environment' and 'trans-corporeal' although they do not engage with 'scientific and medical information,' as the memoirs Alaimo analyzes do. In haptic sublime experiences, contact with and understanding of environments are obtained through hard physical effort which allows the climbers to better apprehend the impenetrable difficulty of the sublime. The haptic sublime is therefore more focused on the repositioning of the 'mountain sublime' in a state that places the human as, if not 'intermeshed' with the non-human environment, which ecocritic and ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo (2010, 2) has termed 'trans-corporeality,' more physically connected with it.

Such an approach aligns with the call of literary scholars and ecocritics such as Ngai (2005), Houser (2014), Timothy Morton (2018), and Caracciolo (2021) to encompass and comprehend a wider range of (minor and negative) affects such as disgust and discord but also the presumably inexpressible affects linked to the sublime, which are produced or intensified by ecological change. The haptic sublime explores such broader affective dimensions insofar as the haptic involves various sensory systems which (re)position our experience in a greater degree of intimacy and produces a wider array of feelings. McNee's conceptualisation of the 'haptic sublime,' however, suggests an ableist perspective on haptic experience since it is restricted to people who are not disabled and can make full use of most if not all their limbs, an issue that McNee does not address in his account. In spite of this regrettable bias, interpreting descriptions of haptic sublime can encourage humans to start thinking *with a* mountain, that is to reflect on affects mountaineering produces and on what they mean to the broader experience of the sublime and to the relationship between self and environment that it constructs.

As a recreational hunter and naturalist, Aldo Leopold struggled with tensions that echo mountain sublime rhetoric. For instance, when pondering over the idea of killing wolves to increase the number of deer in mountains, he 'see[s] the green fire dies' in the eyes of the dead 'old wolf' he has just shot, suggesting that the inconvenient presence of wolves in mountains,

almost perceived as invasive by hunters, is fundamental to the ecosystem balance of the grander mountain environment (1970, 140–41). Leopold's famous phrase 'think like a mountain' promotes an arguably biocentric or ecologically 'anthropocentric' (Fromm 1993, 48) view of ecosystems which invites humans to adopt the behavior of mountains, but it also makes 'use of simile' and therefore 'locates the reader in figurative language as an appropriate and compatible dwelling to occupy, to linger in, in order to pursue this thought process' (Holdefer 2020, 28). In a similar fashion but without simile, this essay argues that some memoirs which do not necessarily include figurative language (but, for example, self-questioning passages and the use of epigraphs) suggest that the practice of mountaineering or climbing can lead to a comparable reflection to the one Leopold conveys by means of his experience of hunting. In other words, by moving on to the more recent and less alienating haptic sublime in our relation to natural environments, which is, as this essay attempts to show in the next section, envisioned in Krakauer's mountaineering memoirs, such a materialist project of 'trans-corporeality' could emerge.

While embracing the basic premise of 'econarratology' that 'understandings of narrative change as the environment changes,' this chapter undertakes a narratological and rhetorical analysis of descriptions of the sublime in Jon Krakauer's mountaineer writings to demonstrate that it is not the sublime that is 'no longer relevant theoretically' but that it is the narrative of the sublime which needs to be changed as our environmental context is altered and ecological awareness is raised (James and Morel 2020, 1; Brady 2013, 185). Informed by recent insights from rhetorical (eco)narratology, this chapter proceeds to what rhetorical narrative scholars James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz have termed 'theory-practice,' or 'inquiries in which theory aids the work of interpretation even as that work allows for further developments in theory' (Phelan 2017, 4). In other words, it uses the lens of the sublime in close readings to illustrate the theoretical limits and affordances of the haptic sublime for exploring minor affects

produced by physical encounters with environments, which also highlights the relevance of these notions in both theories and understandings of the sublime. Considering econarratology's close relationship with Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality inasmuch as it appeals to 'embodied cognition'—or 'the idea that cognition is dependent upon the experience of the physical body in an environment'—and 'enactivism'—or 'the idea that consciousness arises via a body's interaction with its environment'—, this essay suggests that descriptions of mountains and climbing that deploy haptic sublime rhetoric complicate the affective dimension of mountaineering in a way that enriches our understanding of the relationship between self and (mountain) environments (James and Morel 2020, 10–12).

Jon Krakauer's Mountaineering Memoirs: Exploring the Affective Dimension of Haptic Sublime Moments

Jon Krakauer's two chapters entitled 'The Stikine Ice Cap' from his bestseller *Into the Wild* (1996), which is devoted to Christopher McCandless's hiking adventures in North America and Alaska in the 1990s, develop the haptic dimension of the sublime. The first chapter begins with two quotes on rock climbing, one from John Menlove Edwards's 'Letter from a Man' in which he claims that his mind 'was wanting something more, something *tangible*' and the other from Thoreau's *Journal* (1837–1861), in which wilderness aesthetics and the natural sublime unambiguously prevails as he ascends an 'unhandselled, awful, grand' mountainous landscape which could 'never become familiar' (Krakauer 1996, 133, emphasis added).[1] The chapter's main difference from the rest of the creative nonfiction book, which makes it belong to a particular category of autobiography or memoir, is that the author and narrator, Krakauer, replaces the protagonist, McCandless, as he identifies with his resentment toward his father,

[1] As José Sánchez Vera notes, the term 'unhandselled' was 'coined by Emerson and used by Thoreau' and refers to 'nature as untouched, unused or unproven by the human being' (2015, 50).

which is confusingly conflated with a desire to make the father proud.[2] As a result of this troubling relationship, Krakauer explains, he developed in his youth a coping mechanism in what first appears as a frontiersman's self-reliant desire to defeat the terrifying and dangerous wilderness and the traditional mountain sublime:

> I devoted most of my waking hours to fantasizing about, and then undertaking, ascents of remote mountains in Alaska and Canada—obscure spires, steep and frightening, that nobody in the world beyond a handful of climbing geeks had ever heard of (134).

However, climbing turned out to enrich his imagination as he comments on his experience in a much more positive approach that defies the fraught Burkean and natural sublimes:

> Some good actually came of this. By fixing my sights on one summit after another, I managed to keep my bearing through some thick postadolescent fog. Climbing *mattered*. The danger bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything—the sweep of the rock, the orange and yellow lichens, the texture of the clouds—to stand out in brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real (134).

Krakauer does not establish a firm ontological border between the human (himself) and the nonhuman (the so-called 'unhandselled' [Krakauer 1996, 133] mountain landscape). Unlike what the traditional sublime suggests, he seeks a committed and less observational relationship with the mountain which eventually transforms the 'frightening' into 'brilliant relief.' Lastly, Krakauer's ascent is a coming of age experience which got him through a 'postadolescent fog' because he concludes that 'the world was made real' through his transformational experience. This comment contrasts with a claim he makes in an earlier book, *Eiger Dreams: Ventures*

[2] Vera uses Sidone Smith and Julia Watson's term 'auto/biography' to define Krakauer's 'mode of narrative that inserts a personal narrative within a biography' (Vera 2015, 42; Smith 2001, 184).

Among Men and Mountains, that ‘constructions of the imagination have a way of blurring with reality’ since, in this case, his idealization of what climbing mountains had meant for him or for other mountaineers and poets did not influence his epiphany (1997, 5).

The ascent of the ‘Devils Thumb,’ a challenging Alaskan mountain for every climber, leads Krakauer to further introspects as he reflects upon solitude and gets an introductory taste of the haptic sublime. At first, Krakauer seems persuaded that climbing for him is what John Menlove Edwards, from whom he quotes twice in the chapter, terms a ‘psycho-neurotic tendency’ or a form of ‘refuge from the inner torment that framed his existence’ (135). Then, Krakauer’s opinion on solitude and human interactions evolves and specifically because of a decisive encounter with a woman named Kai Sandburn:

> I had convinced myself for many months that I didn’t really mind the absence of intimacy in my life, the lack of real human connection, but the pleasure I’d felt in this woman’s company—the ring of her laughter, the innocent *touch* of a hand on my arm—exposed my self-deceit and left me hollow and aching (137, emphasis added).

Through intimate and physical contact with Kai, Krakauer realizes his ‘self-deceit,’ or that isolation in mountains may not be the healthiest way of dealing with personal issues. When back climbing the Devils Thumb, he acknowledges that ‘alone, […], even the mundane seem[s] charged with meaning’ as the peaks are ‘infinitely more menacing than they would have been [had he been] in the company of another person’ (138). As his ‘emotions [are] similarly amplified’ with ‘periods of despair’ that get ‘deeper and darker,’ time spent alone in the mountains has ‘enormous appeal’ but also seems uncomforting since he later feels ‘abandoned, vulnerable, [and] lost’ (138–41).

However, when Krakauer reaches the ‘Witches Cauldron Glacier,’ the climbing experience turns into what he describes as a ‘trancelike state’ that ‘settles over your efforts,’ ‘a

clear-eyed dream' which makes you forget 'the accumulated clutter of day-to-day existence' for a brief moment as 'an overpowering clarity of purpose' and the 'seriousness of the task at hand' gradually install (142–43). Such a conclusion results from demanding haptic efforts that eventually make his bodily movements automatic in what becomes an entirely embodied experience of the mountainside:

> All that held me to the mountainside, all that held me to the world, were two thin spikes of chrome molybdenum stuck half inch into a smear of frozen water, yet the higher I climbed, the more comfortable I became. Early on a difficult climb, especially a difficult solo climb, you constantly feel the abyss pulling at your back. To resist takes a tremendous conscious effort; you don't dare to let your guard down for an instant. […] But as the climb goes on, you grow accustomed to the exposure, you get used to rubbing shoulders with doom, you come to believe in the reliability of your hands and feet and head. You learn to trust your self-control (142).

This climbing moment, which provides him with 'something resembling happiness,' is what differentiates the haptic from the traditional sublime, as well as from Edwards's 'psycho-neurotic' attitude (143). Krakauer's experience has affinities with McNee's 'haptic sublime' inasmuch as it is 'transformed by an infusion of physical exercise and hazardous contact with mountain landscapes, and by a heightened concern with materiality' (2016, 149). Krakauer's 'trancelike state' and his use of a terminology traditionally associated with the sublime—words like 'difficult,' 'tremendous,' 'exposure'—are also reminiscent of McNee's argument that the 'physical connection' is 'directly responsible for creating a powerful, even transcendent emotional experience in the climber,' who does not necessarily use the term 'sublime' but describes an experience that is undoubtedly sublime (2016, 149). Contrary to the Burkean distant and fraught experience of mountain landscapes, Krakauer's climbing moment exemplifies the haptic sublime experience because of its 'aesthetic of mastery, of overcoming a threat or difficulty' rather than of pondering over or submitting to its perceived divinity (2016,

151). Besides, Krakauer's sublime is not centered around the sense of sight but, rather, 'involve[s] the whole body' (2016, 153). As he overcomes the sense of overwhelm produced by the overpowering mountain, it is Krakauer's 'clarity of purpose' that becomes 'overpowering,' which suggests that, unlike traditional sublime moments, 'the human subject's sense of agency and power is reinforced rather than diminished by the experience of danger and physical suffering' (Krakauer 1996, 142–143; McNee 2016, 158). The choice of the word 'happiness' to characterize the experience also echoes McNee's interpretation of the term in Albert F. Mummery's account of 'The Aiguilles des Charmoz and de Grepon' as an expression of the haptic sublime or as the surprisingly comforting and exhilarating feeling that the climber experiences after a difficult ascent (2016, 159). If the perception of the Burkean or natural sublime seems to be an inevitable stage in the climber's sublime moment, Krakauer's approach evokes what McNee identifies as a determining factor of the haptic sublime, namely 'the effect of diminishing interest in the sublime object, and even to a certain extent in the perceiving subject, concentrating instead on the processes by which sublime affect is produced' (2016, 161). By surpassing the spiritually elevating moment, Krakauer's climb becomes, through intense and risky physical contact, a 'finely attuned instrument for making sense of [the mountainous] landscape' (2016, 175).

The second 'Stikine Ice Cap' chapter also starts with two quotations: one from John Muir's *Mountains of California* (1882) which highlights the 'uncontrollable there is' in climbers (Krakauer 1996, 145), and the other from Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975), which portrays a complex father-son relationship centered on a son who seems deeply affected by his unloving paternal upbringing. The structure and form of the different chapters, which all include one or two epigraphs, are meant to set the tone of the storyline. If the first Ice Cap chapter conveys the author's desperate need to find meaning and comfort in the act of climbing, the second one details the trauma he suffered from his troubling relationship with his

father, which negatively impacted his perception of climbing. This contextualization of Krakauer's unstable father-son relationship also constitutes a narrative technique, a backstory as well as a hypodiegetic story inasmuch as it helps both Krakauer, who experienced a similar trauma, and the reader to identify or sympathize with Chris McCandless while contributing to the romanticization of the story (Vera 2015, 59). At the end of the chapter, Krakauer compares his climbing experience with Chris McCandless's last moments in Alaska as they 'were similarly affected by the skewed relationships [they] had with [their] fathers' and had a 'similar agitation of the soul' (155). Chris's sister, Carine McCandless, also published her memoir *The Wild Truth* (2014) in which she points out Chris's unstable family life as the main determining factor that urged him to embark in his life-ending journey in Alaska. Since Krakauer's first climb of the Devils Thumb was unsuccessful, this contextualization is used by the author to justify his hard-headed and reckless behavior as he depicts himself as a sore loser who made the decision to give it another try during which he finally reached the summit. Initially, his description of the summit is again reminiscent of the Burkean horror insofar as it 'was a surreal, malevolent place,' but he then feels 'euphoria' and an 'overwhelming sense of relief' when he returns, which was followed by 'an unexpected melancholy' (153–154). As the descent is not exactly part of the sublime experience, it is a significant stage for Krakauer because it insures its completion by provoking a necessary feeling of relief. This essay's interpretation of the descent contrasts with literary scholar Anne C. McCarthy's 'Red Bull Sublime' and view of the descent of the Everest in *Into Thin Air* as 'almost taken for granted as an inevitable, but far less interesting, part of the process' (2017, 546). Indeed, there are similarities between Krakauer's melancholy and the positive aspects of the (haptic) sublime since, as philosophers Emily Brady and Arto Haapala have argued, both the sublime and melancholy involve feelings of pain, fear, or 'loneliness' which are then overcome and replaced by 'the exhilaration of our capacity to cope with an impending obstacle' for the sublime and the comeback 'to the sweetness of

particular memories' for melancholy (Brady and Haapala 2003). In Krakauer's case, there is reluctance and then refusal to concede to fear or pain or to be discouraged by danger, which finally provides him with heightened self and environmental awareness. Whether this ascent turned out to be a positive haptic sublime experience, in which overwhelming relief prevails over the overpowering mountain landscape, he cannot but admit that it was a life-threatening act motivated by 'hubris' (155). As Krakauer concludes, 'it changed almost nothing,' 'but [he] came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams' (155). From this significant climb (and descent), Krakauer realizes that the sublime may have instilled mountain landscapes with an excess of poetic or spiritual meaning. His personal haptic experience of the Devils Thumb was an opportunity to, through physical effort, gain understanding of the *material* mountain landscape that exists beyond the spirituality and imaginative literary descriptions of the traditional sublime. Ironically, it is Krakauer's story and descriptions that could provoke a similar sentiment in readers.

While traditional theories of the sublime have focused on a spiritually elevating experience of the sublime, they have stimulated a view of (mountain) landscapes as admittedly perilous but also, especially when conflated with frontier ideology, as challenges to be overcome. Krakauer refers to this conflation in *Eiger Dreams* by quoting famous rock climber John Gill who claims that in order 'to be a boulder,' one needs 'to be on the frontier, to discover things' (17). In his reading of Slavoj Žižek's take on the sublime, Shaw rightfully notes that 'the sublime does indeed verge on the ridiculous' because 'it encourages us to believe that we can scale the highest mountains' and 'become infinite' whereas 'all the time it is drawing us closer to our actual material limits: the desire to outstrip earthly bonds leads instead to the encounter with lack, an encounter that is painful, cruel, and some would say comic' (Shaw 2017, 10). The association of the sublime with the ridiculous is also reminiscent of Sianne Ngai's approach to the aesthetic categories of the 'cute,' 'zany,' and 'interesting.' For example,

while canonical theories of the sublime celebrate ideas of greatness and infinity, the ridiculous sublime demystifies the act of climbing high mountains, underlining its lack of 'powerful moral and political resonances' and making the climber almost comic or 'cute' in his belief that mountains are accessible and that climbing them will lead to moral elevation (2010, 950). Ultimately, this experience could culminate in what Ngai calls the 'stuplime' because this 'comical and even farcical element' occurs when the climber faces not 'the infinite but […] finite bits and scraps of material in repetition' which produce 'sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue' (2005, 271–72). More importantly, such a view of the sublime that urges us to 'scale' high mountains is here at the origin of Krakauer's haptic sublime experience, but it results in a more humbling moment which does not border on the comic. In his memoir *Into Thin Air* (1996), in which he recounts the disastrous 1996 Mount Everest expedition during which eight mountaineers passed away, Krakauer conveys that self-determination, or obduracy as he understands it, as well as an idealistic perception of mountains led the climbers to turn a blind eye on other dead climbers' corpses:

> Few of the climbers trudging by had given either corpse more than a passing glance. It was as if there were an unspoken agreement on the mountain to pretend that these desiccated remains weren't real—as if none of us dared to acknowledge what was at stake here (1999, 111).

Adopting an approach reminiscent of what he describes in the Ice Cap chapters, Krakauer further argues that 'adrenaline' was not what motivated the climbers but very much what resembles the haptic sublime conversion of pain to euphoria and relief:

> The ratio of misery to pleasure was greater by an order of magnitude than any other mountain I'd been on; I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was primarily about enduring pain. And in

> subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace (1999, 140).

The repetitive, tedious and painful movements and physical efforts, here expressed by means of the rhetorical device of amplification through the dramatic repetitions of 'week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering' are significant components of the climb. They echo McNee's understanding of the haptic sublime, although they involve not only the haptic but all of the 'lower' sensory systems such as the kinesthetic and the vestibular, which have been traditionally, at least in Western history, 'dedicated to manual labor and the basic feeding and care of the body' (Howes and Classen 2014, 67). A weakness in McNee's theory is therefore his omission of these sensory systems—that the term 'haptic' fail to represent—which complicate and enrich Krakauer's embodied experience. To a lesser degree, Krakauer's description is reminiscent of Ngai's 'stuplime,' especially because it converts repetitive tedious efforts into the shocking result of a 'state of grace,' which is the haptic sublime's pleasurable outcome.[3] The moment of 'stuplimity,' Ngai explains, stems from a correlation of shock or astonishment with boredom which is caused by exhausting repetitions and permutations, a rhetorical and narratological strategy which enables the reader to develop minor feelings beyond traditional templates of awe or horror. For example, Ngai uses, Gertrude Stein's modernist novel *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (1925), in which 'repeating is […] the dynamic force by which new beginnings, histories, and genres are produced and organized' (2005, 262). In addition to 'stuplimity,' this 'state of grace' and the satisfaction it provides seem to obscure if not obliterate notions of vulnerability and mortality as 'mortality had remained a conveniently hypothetical concept, an idea to ponder in the

[3] McCarthy discusses this specific 'state of grace' passage in her article 'Reading the Red Bull Sublime' as representative of the 'higher meaning' climbers instill into the act of ascending while the process of descending appears as tedious and banal (2017, 546). My analysis focuses instead on the transformation of the 'enduring pain' into 'pleasure' since it is more relevant in my interpretation of Krakauer's haptic sublime experience.

abstract' and climbing a way of 'idealiz[ing] risk-taking' and 'steal[ing] a glimpse across [the] forbidden frontier' of mortality (Krakauer 1999, 282–87).

Despite his idealization of risk and personal accomplishment, Krakauer ambiguously alternates in the Stikine Ice Cap chapters as well as in *Into Thin Air* between 'an emphasis on self-reliance' and his difficulty bearing loneliness (1999, 11). For example, a recurrent technique in Krakauer's writings is, as this essay has shown, to include epigraphs at the beginning of his chapters. This practice is again repeated in *Into Thin Air*, in which some of the quotes evoke loneliness, like in Thomas F. Hornbein's *Everest: The West Ridge* (1965), or a need to rely on one's own competence and survival skills more than on other people, like in Krakauer's mentor David Roberts's *Moments of Doubt: And Other Mountaineering Writings* (1986). Besides, while he acknowledges that being guided by Sherpas, who basically did everything from cooking to carrying their equipment, through the Everest was 'hugely unsatisfying' (176), Krakauer comes to, when he is back to the United States, (re)appreciate intimacy with his wife and the undemanding, 'ordinary pleasures of life at home' which 'generated flashes of joy that bordered on rapture' (282). As this passage and the climb of the Devils Thumb showcase, positive emotions of relief and joy are often used by Krakauer to characterize the aftermath of his haptic sublime experience, and they are also frequently conflated with a renewed appreciation of simplicity. For instance, in his essay 'Descent to Mars,' he describes his return to the surface after exploring the Lechuguilla Cave in Mexico as 'electric, surreal, almost overwhelming' and providing him with a relieving 'whoop of joy' and 'a newfound appreciation of the ordinary' (2019, 65). Still, this relieving moment of 'rapture' occurs after the climb or the descent, thus suggesting again that physical efforts and suffering are prerequisites for the positive outcomes of the haptic sublime. Krakauer's descriptions of haptic moments, however, present this demanding bodily experience of the mountain landscape and the resulting positive emotions of relief, joy and melancholy as vectors of constructive

meaning. If the haptic sublime experience does not (yet) culminate in explicit concerns over environmental disruption, it does lead to a connection with materiality which can be characterized as trans-corporeal. In other words, Krakauer's bodily experience of mountain terrain produces *different* aesthetic engagement than visual contemplation from afar, and thus necessitates a move—at once conceptual, embodied, and affective—beyond the traditional frame of the natural sublime.

Conclusion: Thinking *with a* Mountain, or the Limits and Affordances of the Haptic Sublime in the Memoir

The current context of global ecological crisis compels us to rethink the relationship between self and material environments. Since the sublime has been a prevalent case study for the exploration of the mind-body-environment relationship, its recontextualization and consequential redefinition have become paramount. This chapter's analysis of the haptic sublime in Jon Krakauer's mountaineering works have suggested that the contemporary memoir is a suitable genre for outlining the foundations of such a project because of the narrative strategies and scenarios it employs, which are inevitably human-centered and personal and refer to landscapes that physically exist outside the actual literary text. Despite its unfortunate ableist bias, and its conceptual vagueness inasmuch as the term 'haptic' does not inevitably involve all the human sensorial systems, McNee's revision of the sublime is a productive lens through which self-questioning experiences emerge and develop. What is more, it contributes to enriching our understanding of the sublime and to reevaluating its relevance in affect studies and affective ecocriticism since the (narrative) affects it can deploy—ranging from 'tedium' and 'pain' to 'joy,' 'euphoria' and 'melancholy'—complicate and enrich the affective dimension of the self-environment relationship.

In an essay entitled ‘Embrace the Misery’ published in a recent collection of reedited articles, Krakauer conveys a sense of resignation as he reflects upon the meaning of climbing in an era of global crisis and in relation to Albert Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942):

> As a gray-haired alpinist, you’ve spent more than half a century struggling on high escarpments, inventing purpose out of hardship, and conjuring meaning from otherwise senseless acts. For Sisyphus to be contented as he toils beneath his rock doesn’t strike you as far-fetched. But when you contemplate the uncertain future and the Sisyphean tribulations it’s apt to impose, actual joy seems a little too much to hope for. All things considered, you’d settled for stoical resolve (2019, 178).

The sublime has for ages served poets and mountaineers alike to make sense of the ineffable or impenetrable. Contrary to what Krakauer seems to suggest, his ‘senseless acts’ or risky haptic experiences of mountain rocks and landscapes go beyond Sisyphus’s content with his daily meaningless struggle. Krakauer humbly, and possibly unconsciously, reminds us that commitment entails contact, that the sublime experience has to be direct and not distant for it to become (eco)critically meaningful and useful. Thinking *with a* mountain will require less of the spiritual mystique surrounding climbing and the traditional sublime, and substantially more of this ‘stoical resolve’ to foster the awareness that haptic sublime moments have to offer.

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