

# Buying the Wilderness Experience: The Commodification of The Sublime

*Richmond m. Eustis jr.*

*Nicholls State University*

## Abstract

This study examines some of the implications of guided wilderness trips against the theoretical framework of the sublime as Kant sets out in the *Critique of Judgment*. In particular, it focuses on the role of professional guides as providers of distancing protection from wild and dangerous nature—at the same time as they attempt to facilitate a possible awe-inspiring encounter with nature in its wild otherness. This exercise of power by capital makes the guide an odd locus of power dynamics—at once the site of complicity and resistance. Guides help generate revenue for industry, but they also may use their position to critique industry’s fable of human domination over nature.

**Keywords:** Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, wilderness, sublime, outdoor industry

The concept of wilderness drags with it a bundle of sometimes contradictory connotations. It is at once a realm of chaos and danger, a blank slate ripe for development, a proving ground, a purifying realm. It is the place of the vision quest, the place the locals warn outsiders away from, the place surveyors scrutinize for development. In Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, it is the place where we might encounter intuitions that delight us with their beauty or stun us with their sublimity. Much of Kant’s third critique examines the subject’s encounter with nature. Especially in his discussion of the sublime, Kant explores themes with important implications for the way in which many people experience the outdoors today. What once was an individual or communal experience increasingly is commodified as a service.

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As cities sprawl and undeveloped land dwindles, the demand for access to remaining rugged territory has increased.<sup>1</sup> Much of the demand comes from those who have not developed sufficient outdoor skill to attempt backcountry ventures wisely on their own, so they require trained guides. The companies that provide these guides can find the trade lucrative. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, outfitters and guide companies in the United States generate \$289 billion annually in sales and services.<sup>2</sup> The OIA's study comprised a few practices some consider extreme—such as whitewater kayaking, mountain biking and telemark skiing—but also included bird watching, RV camping and fishing as part of the revenue pool. Of that total, outdoor services (guiding, entertainment, instruction and food, among other services) generated \$243 billion. With the increased demand for these kinds of activities, the market for guiding companies has grown as well, and the number of self-guided trips into the backcountry has become a smaller percentage of the total number of people venturing into the woods, up the mountains, or on to the ocean. More people are experiencing nature through the prism of a carefully planned trip, with a full market apparatus of training, salaries, and especially insurance backing the venture.

This study examines some of the implications of the guided wilderness trip against the theoretical framework of the sublime as Kant sets out in his *Critique of Judgment*. In particular, it focuses on the role of paid professional guides as providers of distancing protection from wild and dangerous nature—at the same time as they attempt to facilitate a possible awe-inspiring encounter with nature in its wild otherness. To determine whether an experience of the sublime in a Kantian sense even is possible on such a venture, this analysis moves through a few stages. First, there is a brief discussion of Kant's aesthetic system, with an extended discussion of the aspects of the sublime as they bear on the modern wilderness experience—a disinterested encounter with, in Paul Crowther's definition, "a set of items which, through the possession or suggestion of perceptually, imaginatively or emotionally overwhelming properties, succeeds in rendering the scope of some human capacity vivid to the senses" (Crowther, 162). Then it takes up the issue of the guide as mediator of one's encounter with the wild. That is, as the guide manages encounters with nature, there is the possibility of the sublime experience, but only insofar as the guide walks a fine line between an obviously engineered experience and one subject to the very real dangers and discomforts of the wilderness.

## The Sublime, Natural and Unnatural

Kant's definition of the sublime is complicated: "The sublime can be described thus: it is an object (of nature) the *presentation of which determines the mind to think of nature's inability to attain to a presentation of ideas*" (Kant, 268).<sup>3</sup> So, in order to have the sublime at all, there must be a manifold perceivable in some way. Then there must be an effort to present the intuited manifold and then a failure on the part of the imagination. Then there must be a realization that while the subject can present an idea through reason nature cannot.

True sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement. Indeed, who would want to call sublime such things as shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea? But the mind feels elevated in its own judgment of itself when it contemplates these without concern for their form and abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason that has come to be connected with it—though quite without a determinate purpose, and merely expanding it—and finds all the might of the imagination still inadequate to reason's ideas. (Kant, 256)

Although from time to time Kant refers to objects as sublime, he is using a sort of shorthand for a point he hammers more than once: in the experience of the sublime, what is truly sublime is the operation of the mind, not the manifold the subject intuits. As he defines it in terms of the mathematical sublime: "It is a magnitude that is equal only to itself. It follows that the sublime must not be sought in things of nature, but must be sought solely in our ideas" (Kant, 250). The mountain is not sublime. That which the mountain enables our mind to do is sublime. Or, as Lee Rozelle explains: "The post-Kantian sublime no longer resides on Mount Blanc itself, but rather somewhere between the craggy, snow-capped peak and the mind of the observer" (Rozelle, 4).

Kant sets out two varieties of the sublime: the mathematical and the dynamical. The mathematical sublime is referred to the faculty of cognition (theoretical reason), while the dynamical sublime is referred to the faculty of desire (practical reason). The former is an absolutely massive challenge to the cognitive powers, where the latter is an inconceivably powerful check on our freedom. Essential to the dynamical sublime is the concept

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of fear. For a manifold to qualify as provoking the sublime, it must be fearful, but it must not provoke fear. As with the beautiful, the sublime must remain disinterested. To provoke fear in the onlooker is to provoke an interest—specifically the interest of getting away and never again being in such a situation. To be truly sublime, there must be fearfulness without fear. But without the ability to provoke fear in the onlooker, the sublime cannot occur. “We can, however, consider an object *fearful* without being afraid of it,” Kant writes, “namely, if we judge it in such a way that we merely *think* of the case where we might possibly want to put up resistance against it, and that any resistance would in that case be utterly futile” (Kant, 260). That is, there must be fear, and it must be viewed from a place of safety. Doing so, Kant contends, allows the mind to come to a realization of its own sublime power. We find “a superiority over nature;” that is: “an ability to resist which is quite of a different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence” (Kant, 261). In the dynamical sublime, the subject learns that nature cannot subdue the mind. The subject can imagine situations in which the mind can resist the power of nature.

However, the simple presence of a manifold causing fear is not enough in itself to provoke an experience of the sublime. The fear must be of a specific kind. It must, in short, be purposeless and without interest. It must also provoke an awareness of a will not only counter to that of the subject, but utterly alien to it and incommensurate with it. In order for a perception of the sublime to be pure, it must consist in fearfulness without fear. If the fear is manifest, then the sublime is not possible. To contemplate and reflect upon the unmatched power of the avalanche is all but impossible when one is trying to escape being buried by it. (However, a true sublime experience may result from contemplation of the avalanche field once one is in a safe place.) A subject faced with a real threat—not safe from it—does not have the receptive mind necessary to appreciate the sublime. He become like Kant and Saussure’s Savoyard peasant who “did not hesitate to call anyone a fool who fancies glaciated mountains” (Kant, 265). That is, though a subject may have a mind that in the proper surroundings might appreciate the sublime, the presence of real threats and perceptions of immediate danger may render that subject’s mind temporarily unreceptive. Faced with real danger, “[i]n all the evidence of nature’s destructive force [*Gewalt*], and in the large scale of its might, in contrast to which his own is nonexistent, [the subject] will see only the hardship, danger and misery that would confront anyone forced to live in such a place” (Kant, 265).

Perception in this case is essential. In a strict Kantian sense, the actual existence of the fearful manifold has no bearing on its sublimity. However, I think we must add, as some theorists do, a caveat here. That is, the actual existence of the fearful manifold has no bearing on the manifold's suitability as a stimulus of the sublime *provided that the subject perceives the object as fearful*. For example, a sailor on the open ocean perceives what seems to be a mighty storm cell a safe distance away off his bow. Though the sailor does not know it, he has misread the clouds and his instruments. Though he might perceive the cell as a powerful tempest, it's really just indicative of an hour or two of mild showers. As long as the sailor perceives the cell as fearful, the sublime is possible. However, if he checks his instruments again and learns that what he thought was a tempest is really a band of light showers, the possibility of the sublime is negated. Crowther sets out an analogous hypothetical for the mathematical sublime. "Suppose we take pleasure in the sturdiness of an oak tree, only to find that it is rotten to the core. Would not the discovery of this fact about the 'real existence' of the tree totally spoil our pleasure?" (Crowther, 143).

The answer to this is subtler than yes or no; it is a conditional yes or no. If we are taking an interested pleasure in the tree—as a possible new wood floor or a good place to climb—then discovering its rotten core ruins our pleasure, which is founded on taste. In the Kantian sublime the subject is to be satisfied by the form of the tree alone—not by its use for any particular purpose. However, on attaining the knowledge that the tree is rotten, surely one's aesthetic appreciation of its form as massive and sturdy is tainted? Much the same proposition holds for the perception of danger. In the case of a sailor confronting a storm at sea, if the interested sailor (one not at a safe distance from the cell) learns that the tempest is really just a light shower, he is relieved. If the disinterested sailor learns that the mammoth storm is really nothing much, surely the sublime is not possible. The fearfulness of the manifold has been lost. As Crowther suggests: "If the danger is only imaginary, then perhaps we are at best playful and at worst insincere, in our appreciation of the soul's sublimity" (Crowther, 113).

Though the sublime is not necessarily exclusive to the natural world, generally that is where the most provocative manifolds are to be found. It is important to note that Kant does not set up a pure binary opposition of the sublime/not-sublime. There is a continuum, as the power of the sublime increases or decreases according to an array of internal and external factors.

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[C]onsider bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, and the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on. Compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. *Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is*, provided we are in a safe place. (Kant, 261)(emphasis mine)

As Kant notes, the sublime increases in intensity the more fearful the object of contemplation is. The more intense the encounter with the colossal or stupefyingly powerful alien will is, the more sublime the reaction of the subject's mind will be. This is not to say that something is not either sublime or not—there is no such thing in Kant's system as a manifold that is "kind of sublime." However, once a manifold provokes the feeling of the sublime in a subject, that sense of sublimity can be intensified or softened, depending on the fearfulness or intensity of the manifold the subject contemplates. That is, once a subject has become aware of the sublime, some stimuli provoke a more powerful reaction than others. Even to qualify as sublime, a manifold must be purposeless. "We must not take for our examples such beautiful or sublime objects of nature as presuppose the concept of a purpose. For then the purposiveness would be either teleological, and hence not aesthetic, or else be based on mere sensations or an object (gratification or pain) and hence not merely formal" (Kant, 270). In a strict interpretation, that would seem to mean roadless terrain, with little sign that humanity has put it to use. The more the manifold shows itself pliable to the human will, presumably, the less use that manifold is for provoking the sublime. This leads to a difficulty in establishing what Kant means by "nature" in reference to the sublime. He is not speaking of gardens, crop fields, parks or orchards, certainly. As Edward Casey suggests, "A pleasant and healthy landscape lacks intensity; it lulls us into the pleasure of the beautiful. Only where landscape is sublime does tension arise...between an imagination not able to comprehend the complexity of the scene and a reason that claims to go far beyond it" (Casey, 199). Before we can establish the guide as mediator between nature and subject, it's necessary to explore where man-manipulated nature ends, and "crude nature" or wilderness begins.

## The Problem of Wilderness

Attempting a definition of the term “nature” highlights the difficulty of arriving at a consensus definition of the term “wilderness.” Roderick Nash indicates: “Depending on the context, for instance, ‘nature’ might be synonymous with wilderness, or it could refer to a city park” (Nash, 6). The city park, as we have seen, is unsuitable for an apprehension of the sublime. Rather, the sublime stems from an encounter with what Kant calls “crude nature.” While not synonymous, the expression indicates that Kant has wilderness in mind for his site of encounters that provoke the sublime. One may imagine crude nature in a non-wilderness setting, but conceiving of a wilderness without crude nature is impossible. So if we are to determine this site of the sublime, we must attempt to establish what constitutes a wilderness. Nash writes that ecologist Aldo Leopold defined wilderness as a tract of land that could absorb a two-week backpacking trip. Nash is less demanding in terms of the magnitude of the area. “In theory,” he writes, “if a person does not see, hear or smell civilization, he is in wilderness. But most people want the additional knowledge that a soft-drink dispenser is not quietly humming around the trail’s next bend. Some want it to be miles away” (Nash, 4). With this definition Nash links the concept of wilderness with perception and knowledge. It must look like wilderness, but it must also include knowledge that civilization is not 30 feet away. Wilderness, or the perception of it, depends on the perceiving mind’s ability to order a complicated manifold. As one subject may perceive fearfulness where another may not, so one may perceive wilderness where another may not.

Nash traces the etymology of the term “wilderness” to the Old English “wild-deor-ness”: “the place of wild beasts” (Nash, 2). In literature, at least since the Classical period, the concept of wilderness has stood opposed not only to the concept of civilization, but also to the notion of the garden—nature tamed and bent to the will of humans. In one traditional concept, wilderness is inhospitable, alien, a condition to struggle against, and a place where men go mad—like Roland and Lancelot. Scripture—especially the story of Eden and Man’s ejection from it, “embedded into Western thought the idea that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites” (Nash, 15). That is, wilderness stood opposed to paradise, envisioned as an all-nurturing garden. However, wilderness also acquired meaning as a testing ground for the virtuous. It was where the Israelites wandered to be purged, purified, to make them worthy of the promised land. As Nash notes, wilderness was “the environment of evil and hardship *where spiritual catharsis occurred*. Jesus emerged from the wilderness prepared to speak for God” (Nash, 17).<sup>4</sup> Encompassing these

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definitions is sometimes self-contradictory. “On the one hand, wilderness is inhospitable, alien, mysterious, and threatening; on the other, beautiful, friendly, and capable of elevating and delighting the beholder. Involved, too, in this second conception is the value of wild country as a sanctuary in which those in need of consolation can find respite from the pressures of civilization” (Nash, 4).<sup>5</sup> Here, Nash touches on the reasons one might choose to seek out the wilderness: in one sense a respite, in another a realm capable of elevating the beholder, enabling him to experience the sublime.

However, finding wilderness pure enough to meet the standard of “crude nature” might be difficult if one adopts a strict definition of purposelessness. Does a blazed trail demolish the possibility of the sublime? What if on the trail into a deep gorge, one finds a PowerBar wrapper? “To insist on absolute purity could conceivably result in wilderness being only that land which the foot of man has never trod” Nash writes (Nash, 4). For purposes of legislation, the U.S. Government relies on the Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Even this definition is a problem for our purposes, if only because of the question of how “untrammelled” such land must be. Nash proposes a useful and elegant solution: wilderness is defined along a range, “from the purely wild on the one end to the purely civilized on the other—from the primeval to the paved” (Nash, 6). In the realm of the purely civilized, nature is the outpost—the stuff of city parks and street landscaping. Wilderness, on the other hand, is “Predominantly the environment of the non-human, the place of wild beasts... Vast, largely unmodified regions would be very close to absolute wilderness: the North American continent prior to settlement serves as an example” (Nash, 7). A single footprint on a trodden but unimproved trail several miles from a road would not disqualify the area for wilderness—even if the subject spots a footprint or two more in the dirt on the way.

### **Why Enter the Wilderness?**

If it is so that, for centuries, humanity has been doing its best to throw back the borders of the wilderness in favor of expanding civilization, why is it that after having achieved such spectacular success in the last half-century or so, the desire to seek out (and to fight to preserve!) rugged spaces for their own sake has appeared? It is, of course, impossible to trace the beginning of what we call the outdoor industry. Accounts of explorers braving the

wilderness are as old as the oldest stories. The difference is in the intent of these explorations—the purposes for which they were undertaken. In this sense, the interest of the explorer is caught up in the notion of the sublime. Earlier explorers sought the wilds at least in part to demark and explore the limits of what they knew as civilization. Later, there was the urge to expand that civilization (usually on behalf of its markets). Still later—in the United States of the 19th Century for example—much exploration was undertaken in pursuit of a sort of physical census of the nation. Lewis and Clark are perhaps the most famous. John Wesley Powell, whom this study addresses later, is another explorer who put his abilities and affinities to work for an expanding United States. His descriptions of the territory “beyond the 100th meridian” included suggestions for wise development of the Rocky Mountains and Grand Canyon region (though his suggestions were honored mostly by being ignored). Only relatively recently has emerged the desire to venture into the wild not for financial gain nor for the purpose of extending one’s civilization, but simply for the purpose of encounter with the wild. What once was primarily a supremely interested endeavor, in the Kantian sense, has in some cases slowly transformed into a more disinterested one. However, in other cases, the interest simply has turned to a new object.

A glance at two prominent guiding and wilderness instruction programs’ catalogs gives a sense of what appeals to their clients. For example, the National Outdoor Leadership School, based in Lander, Wyoming, makes a convincing case for the wilderness trip on its website:

We define wilderness as a place where nature is dominant and situations and their consequences are real. Living in these conditions, away from the distractions of modern civilization, fosters self-reliance, judgment, respect, and a sense of responsibility for our actions. It can also be a profoundly moving experience that leads to inspiration, joy and commitment to an environmental ethic.

The text begins with a description of what the school—perhaps the most prominent outdoor training school and guide company in the world—considers the wilderness. Key in the description are the “dominance” of nature and the reality of the dangers one might confront in the wild. This echoes the awe faced with the power and fearfulness of nature in the Kantian sublime. It is the foundation for the sublime experience. The description then sets out a series of purposes for which one might enter the wilderness: to foster self-reliance, judgment, and so on. One who undertakes an outdoor trip for these purposes is seeking something

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other than a sublime experience. However, it may be that such judgment, respect and self-reliance is forged in confrontation with the immeasurably great force of nature as apprehended in the dynamical sublime. Last, the writer notes that such a trip “can also be a profoundly moving experience that leads to inspiration, joy and commitment to an environmental ethic.” Leaving aside the reference to an environmental ethic, which Kant does not address directly, the first parts of the NOLS statement reflects much of Kant’s assessment of what happens to the properly prepared human mind in the wild: “Thus, any spectator who beholds massive mountains climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging streams in them... is indeed seized by amazement bordering on terror, by horror and a sacred thrill” (Kant, 269). One can enter the wilderness for a chance at the sublime—a chance to experience the inspiration, the joy, the sacred thrill such an encounter might provoke. But not everyone could do such a thing alone. A wilderness excursion without the proper skills would be incapable of achieving the Kantian sublime, as it would tend to plunge the suspect into a dangerous—hence profoundly interested—scenario. Hence, the necessity for guides, and through guides, for the outdoor industry.

### **The Safety Machine**

Taking to the wilderness with a guide makes sense for several reasons. First, it’s worthwhile to go with someone who knows the region, can indicate and discuss the local plants, wildlife and geology, and can minimize the risk of getting injured or lost. The guide has knowledge and skills valuable in the wild that, presumably, the guide’s clients lack. These might include orienteering, backcountry camping technique, the ability to identify safe food and water, wilderness medicine, even specialized skills like high-angle rescue. Second: the guides are not the only advantage one secures when hiring them. Rather, the client taps into the power of an entire structure of capital that makes the guide possible—the entire outdoor industry. There is, then, an enormous guarantee of one’s security when embarking on a wilderness excursion with a hired professional guide. The guide becomes the personified representative of the industry itself, backed by access to gear and knowledge his clients lack.

The question of safety is an enormous one for the industry—a selling point, and a necessary concern for the client seeking an experience in the wilderness. The wilderness trip is to be a safe encounter with a nature wilder and more powerful than a guide’s clients encounter every day. The wilderness is an essential element, but so is the ability to experience it

safely—as indicated by the marketing material for Wilderness Ventures, a guiding company in Jackson Hole, Wyoming:

We have continually set the standards in this field for conducting safe and successful programming and we are proud that our safety record is unmatched. After thirty-three years, with over fourteen thousand [clients], we have never experienced a serious injury requiring extended hospitalization. This record is the result of our strict staff selection process...our highly detailed procedures for conducting safe activities... which exceeds that of all other outdoor adventure travel programs and outdoor leadership schools... (WV Catalog, 5-6)<sup>6</sup>

While the heavy modifiers in the phrase “a *serious injury requiring extended hospitalization*” might raise an eyebrow, it’s clear this company seeks to assure clients from the outset that when they take a Wilderness Ventures trip, they are safe—as safe as they can be in the wilderness. In a sense, the text very cleverly lays groundwork for the experience of the sublime. It establishes that trips into the wilderness are, by their nature, dangerous—otherwise, why address the issue of safety at all? However, at the same time that it acknowledges implicitly that such trips are dangerous, it also reassures the reader that safety is of paramount importance. Not only is the company a safe one—it is safer than any other a prospective client might choose. NOLS, too, “accept[s] risk as an integral part... of the environments through which we travel... We believe successful risk management stems from good judgment based on experience, training and knowledge.” That experience, training and knowledge comes in handy for the client in the woods, but it’s also absolutely essential for the wilderness outfitter if it is to survive. Because of the risky activities participants undertake on wilderness trip, because of all the things that can go wrong, the probability of a crippling lawsuit is high. To mitigate extremely high insurance costs, a wilderness company must to convince its insurers that its guides are trained in keeping with industry standards and practices. Wilderness Ventures’s catalog provides a description of that training:

In addition to their many other qualifications, all of our staff members are fully trained in first aid and emergency procedures. Most of our staff have over 120 hours of wilderness first aid training and many are emergency medical technicians. While extensive formal first aid

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training is helpful, it can never take the place of highly experienced and trained leaders who make appropriate and safe decisions. Our carefully selected staff members and high standards are responsible for our enviable safety record...(WV Catalog, 11-12)

The emphasis here is on training, supplemented by judgment, but buttressed by certifications—warrants from industry-recognized organizations that a particular individual is able to perform particular skills. The case WV makes to prospective clients is much the same one it makes to the market, in the form of insurance companies. Thus when the client enters the backcountry with a hired guide, he or she knows that there is an entire market structure constraining the company—if it is a good one—not to make decisions that will unduly risk the health of the client. The knowledge of minimized risk, however, should not be enough to minimize the client's encounter with nature, if the guides do their job. Rather, it should enable the client's experience of the sublime.

### Orchestrating the Sublime

The wilderness trip relies on the proposition that the sublime as provoked by crude nature is available as experience to all people whose minds are properly receptive. It is a part of Kant's common sense—a structure of mind shared by all. The sublime, Kant contends, “has its foundations in human nature: in something that, along with common sense, we may require and demand of everyone, namely the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to moral feeling” (Kant, 125). As a person who is unable to perceive beauty lacks taste, so someone unable to perceive the sublime lacks feeling, in Kant's estimation. In *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, Gilles Deleuze makes Kant's suggestion explicit: “We assume that our pleasure (in the sublime) is by rights communicable to or valid for everyone; we assume that everyone must experience this” (Deleuze, 48). This communicability of the sublime is essential to the notion of wilderness outfitting. If such communicability were not possible, the trips could not develop as they have. They would become a purely interested pursuit—a means of losing weight or learning to read a map or to cook outside. They would not produce the kind of awe and joy the sublime engenders and that these companies claim to be able to provoke.

After all, the company and the guide together hope to orchestrate a sense of the sublime in their clients. In order to be successful, the guide must tread a very fine line between the perception of safety and danger. Too much danger, and the sublime is impossible, as the client spends too much

time uncomfortable or terrified, unable to reflect on the sublime the scene might have provoked in other circumstances. These clients, Paul Crowther notes, experience joy in relief, not in the sublime: “While the cessation of actual fear gives rise to a state of joy, it also has two negative consequences: (i) we resolve never to put ourselves in such a dangerous situation again and (ii) we find it distressing even to recall the event” (Crowther, 109). Too much safety, however, and the trip becomes nothing more than a glorified, slightly less comfortable, slightly less crowded theme park visit. The guide constructs an illusory sense of danger, with a real, perceptible apparatus of safety providing the clients with a psychic space from which to contemplate it.

The question of perception is important, because it is the perception of fearsomeness or awesome size or formlessness that makes possible the sublime. Crowther writes that “[t]he scope of rational cognition can be realized just as much by the *appearance* of vastness and power, as it can by the vastness and power of a real object” (Crowther, 149). The guide, then, must maintain the perception or appearance of balance between danger and safety. The actuality of either pole is unimportant to anyone but the guide as long as the guide’s illusion holds. That is, as long as the client can perceive the manifold sparking the sublime, and perceive it from a position of equally perceived safety, the actual presence of either danger or safety is unimportant to the client’s ability to have an experience of the sublime provoked by the present manifold. For example: it may be that the clients are perfectly safe from the lightning storm among a stand of trees, but if the clients do not perceive that safety, the perceptual basis for apprehending the sublime does not take hold. Or the guide may know that crossing a fast river at a given spot is truly dangerous—the most dangerous portion of the trip—but as long as the clients believe they are safe, the sublime is possible. In the course of such a journey, guides become like Kant and Saussure’s Savoyard—profoundly interested in the perception of the manifold the group encounters. The guides are at work, and this interferes with the pure experience of the sublime on their part in most cases. An excerpt from John Wesley Powell’s account of his exploration of the Grand Canyon is illustrative. Though he perceives the astounding beauty and magnificence of the scene around him, “somehow I think of the nine days rations and the bad river and the lesson of the rocks and the glory of the scene are but half conceived” (Powell, 263). Because the guides are always weighing risks, considering logistics and worrying about the health and abilities of their clients, the experience of the sublime for them comes in a different form—not from careful manipulation, but from actual

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unpredictable moments going “off the script.”

However, it's important to remember that wilderness guides are not manipulating wilderness. They are manipulating people—how minds encounter the otherness that is the backcountry. A walk through a gorge might be the easier and more sensible walk, for example, but a difficult hike up the ridge leads one to an astonishing view of crashing waterfalls and rugged country spread for miles. Opting for the latter trip enables the guide to direct the gaze of the client to the manifold that might spark the sublime in those with the capacity to perceive it. (There will always be one or two who would rather complain about sore legs.) And in this manipulation of minds, the guide is in a remarkable position to influence the way in which the clients perceive the wild manifold about them. Most guides, for example, have at least rudimentary training in ecology—and almost all of them have undergone extensive training in zero-impact expeditions—what some refer to as “Leave No Trace” or “zero impact” outdoor ethics and techniques. As the Wilderness Ventures materials claim: “While we are privileged to visit these national treasures, our travels through them instill in us a responsibility for their future survival. On our expeditions, you will learn not only the finest methods of zero-impact camping, but also gain a love for these places...” (Catalog, 17). That is, instead of teaching clients how to dominate the wilderness, the guide demonstrates how to co-exist with it comfortably without damaging it. Here is an interesting twist—industry not only advocating wilderness preservation, but attempting to instill it as an ethic in its customers. In this sense respect and awe faced with the wilderness becomes an imperative for the market—a means of preserving a revenue-generating resource for later continued exploitation. That is, the careful orchestration of the sublime operates to generate revenue, but it also demands that the commercial interest work to protect those places that enable such orchestration. Without the possible encounter with Kant's “raw nature,” it becomes much more difficult to package the sublime. In this sense the guide continues to function as the company's representative: helping to preserve the resources that make the outfitter's existence possible. But guides have other possible functions, owing to their privileged space as mediator between industry, wilderness and client's mind. Those possible functions include teaching clients to wrest these encounters from commercial control, enabling them to encounter the wilderness on their own, without a guide or a commercial apparatus to mediate them.

## Toward a Sublime of Coexistence

The sublime as Kant describes it culminates in a moment of sublime pride—in the resurgent human mind, and the mind’s recognition of its own unfathomable size and indomitable power—its freedom. It is an opportunity to experience the immeasurable power of the surging mind, “a might that allows us to assert our independence of nature” (Kant, 269). As Christopher Hitt describes it, “[T]he discourse of the sublime has operated to confirm the authority and autonomy of a subject over and against a threatening other” (Hitt, 603). The subject of course is the human mind, and nature or wilderness the threatening other. Though backcountry outfitters promote a wilderness ethic that respects the wilderness, it does not do so only as a recognition of the awe and fearfulness the presence of the other provokes. The wilderness ethic as practiced by these companies also is a means of preserving its access to revenue. The wilderness is exploited in a gentler manner, but exploited nonetheless. In the dynamic of the outdoor industry, the company does not exist to foster awe in the face of the wilderness. Rather, that awe of confronting wild nature becomes a means of securing the preservation of the resources that allow the company to make money. There is a dual loyalty here. To make money, the company must preserve wild areas. The sublime in this sense is provoked or orchestrated by humans, and harnessed for a purpose. This is not the man-made sublime of which Crowther writes, one which might encompass the Hoover Dam or the atomic bomb’s mushroom cloud, which focuses on “the products and epiphenomena bound up with technological innovation in the capitalist and state capitalist systems” (Crowther, 165). Rather than presenting a man-made manifold to the perception of the subject, the company though its representative guides controls the way in which its clients perceive manifolds not made by humans. The key to capital’s operation in this case is to make preservation a value for an exploitation of the wild that does not mar it.

This exercise of power by capital makes the guide an odd locus of power dynamics—at once the site of complicity and resistance. Guides are representatives of an industry who nevertheless are in a position to subvert the industry’s dynamic of humanity dominating nature, bending it towards an end that is not nature’s own. The guide is in the position of fostering a sublime that stops at respect and awe in the face of the wilderness, rather than proceeding, as Kant does, to superiority. Such an ecological sublime, Christopher Hitt suggests, would reinforce “a sense of the inexorable otherness of nature.” (Hitt, 612) “by restoring the wonder, the inaccessibility of wild nature. In an age of exploitation, commodification

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and domination we need awe, envelopment and transcendence. We need, at least occasionally, to be confronted with the wild otherness of nature and to be astonished, enchanted, humbled by it” (Hitt, 619). In this sense, such an ecological sublime would recognize the necessity of the “wild manifold” and the receptivity of the perceiving mind. Though they are representatives of an industry that exploits nature in its own gentle way, guides are in the position to remind their clients that it is not nature being manipulated in this case, but people, and the way they perceive the wild. This gentler exploitation manipulates the mind, rather than attempting to alter the manifold. According to Nick Van Noy, an ecological sublime would show that humans “are not masters of the landscape” (Van Noy, 87). This “decentered” sublime, as Van Noy describes it, would rest “not on the transcendence of human reason but through the ‘otherness’ of the other—based on the self’s relationship to what was beyond and outside it” (Van Noy, 163).

This possibility, perhaps, indicates a way to grapple with Hitt’s dilemma: how to preserve Nature’s otherness in the sublime, without reifying it. The guide, as conduit between industry, wilderness and human mind, is in a position to attempt just such a piece of perceptual gymnastics. This would be a sublime that recognizes the necessity of awe and respect for certain experiences of nature as a condition for apprehending the power and freedom of the human mind. The pleasure a mind takes in this sublime might stem from recognition that one lives in a world of real manifolds that seem to have wills alien to our own. It might stem from the realization not that the human mind is part of nature, but that the otherness of nature is an analogue for ourselves—and evidence, perhaps, that inasmuch as we are like such crude nature we exist as more than ghosts in the machine. If the guide does the job properly, the client may learn to respect wilderness, and to navigate it on her own.

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### **(Endnotes)**

- 1 See p108-109 of *The NOLS Wilderness Guide* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), for illustrative, if dated, trend figures.
- 2 The OIC claims that outdoor products and services contribute \$730 billion to the U.S. economy. This includes the impact of 60 million cyclists, 66 million wildlife tourists, 33 million fishers, and 13 million hunters, among others. The \$730 billion figure includes a \$379 billion ripple effect due to the action of "suppliers, intermediaries, and employees" who "circulate money through the economy"
- 3 I follow Werner Pluhar's pagination, based on the Akademie text of 1793.
- 4 Emphasis mine.
- 5 In this incarnation, such wilderness would be accessible only through acts of literature.
- 6 It should, perhaps, be noted that Wilderness Ventures experienced its first fatality in summer 2011. Doubtless the language in its catalog will change.